

THE CAVERNS OF CRAIL

THOMAS SAWYER SPIVEY

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THE CAVERNS OF CRAIL

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THE CAVERNS OF CRAIL

A Novel

BY
THOMAS SAWYER SPIVEY

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The Caverns of Crail

CHAPTER I

THE TRIPLE ALLIANCE

LIKE an avalanche, the mysterious hordes had swept down from the steppes of central Asia and desolated Eran and Persis. The peoples of these and all the surrounding countries had fled in terror before the fanatical warriors of the Sapor, that unknown King of Kings and ruler over all the clans of Arya. The so-called Holy War had spent its fury, simply because there was nothing more upon which to vent its wrath.

Phraortes, king of Eran, had fled his beautiful city, Ecbatana, and was now a refugee, in hiding somewhere along the borders of the Persian gulf. His queen, and little Prince Cyaxares, two years old, had been sent to a small city, Baleria, which was ensconced in a queer little country at the mouth of the river Pol, he having placed them in the care of his captain of guards, Deioces. He knew not whether they were safe from danger or had perished; therefore, upon the first intimation of a lull in the terrible war, he attempted to return to Baleria.

Finally reaching the environs of Baleria, he was anticipated by a faithful priest and one of his former soldiers, Duke Cambyses, and was shocked to learn that Deioces had betrayed his trust, usurped his throne, and was now called king of the Medes, claim-

ing sovereignty also over portions of the lands formerly called Eran. He had issued a proclamation declaring that Phraortes had fled his country, and had perished. He would make Baleria the seat of government, calling upon all who were former subjects of Phraortes to acknowledge him king, and to come into the fertile lands of Ironia, the name that he had given unto the tight little valley in which Baleria was situated at the delta of the river Pol.

The priest, Cracillies, and Cambyses had fled from Baleria at midnight, taking the queen mother and her infant son to a place of hiding and safety in the caverns of Crail, this being the place of abode of a mysterious priesthood of which Cracillies was the head.

During the three holy wars that had occurred in a period of a century not once had the crusaders attempted to enter the sacred precincts of the gardens and caverns of Crail. It was the acknowledged rendezvous of the church heads and of their priests in time of war, and their place of retirement and seclusion in time of peace.

Phraortes had befriended Cracillies, and Cambyses was a member of his household guards, hence the special interest that they had taken in the welfare of the queen and of the little prince.

Phraortes was a good king to his people, and it was a hard blow for them to have to come under the yoke of one of his former guardsmen, who had thus openly betrayed the most sacred trust. Nevertheless, the former king was in no position to protest, and, as Deioces had gathered about him quite a strong army, there was no alternative but submission on the part of the people, such as had survived the frightful hardships of hiding in the mountains. They were coming

into the land of Ironia, a wide range of black swamps lying among the many river branches forming the delta of the Pol. Malaria and pestilence were destroying them almost as fast as they settled. But Deioces had an object; he had sworn to make of this miasmatic spot an earthly paradise, and to make it inhabitable. He would make Baleria the most beautiful city in the world, and dig the wealth out of the rich soil.

A singular freak of nature, this region of less than one hundred square miles was surrounded with perpendicular cliffs, almost high enough to be called mountains, so rugged and difficult of passage that it could only be entered by way of five well-defined passes. An army of one thousand well-equipped soldiers could hold the region against five thousand.

Whether the hordes of the Sapor had expended their fury before reaching Baleria; or whether they saw nothing worth going into the country for, will perhaps never be known, but it was a curious fact that they did not venture through these passes. Deioces had very promptly surrounded himself with every safeguard to establish himself as king, and, because of the greater security here, had chosen this as his seat of government.

So little was known regarding the secret order of the priests of Crail that it was not at the time suspected that this region was spared out of respect for this religious order. The Aryans were known to be religious fanatics, always declaring war in a holy cause. Moreover, the order claimed to be of Aryan origin.

Notwithstanding Deioces had originally been a guardsman, he was a keen-witted man, and his first po-

litical move bespoke for him a remarkable sagacity, equal to the dangerous occasion. Together with his proclamation as king he sent to the Sapor, King of Kings, a proposition for a triple alliance, offensive and defensive, between the Holy Crater, Ironia, and Persis, to safeguard forever the union of the church and the state, which meant the government, and to define their separate rights and prerogatives. This was the first recognition by international treaty of the division of government into two distinct branches.

To the astonishment of the whole world an unknown man had struck the responsive chord in the great mystery among rulers, the Sapor, for a conclave was at once ordered to gather at the old capital city of Ecbatana to ratify such a pact. At this conclave, for the first time in the history of that country, the mysterious order of priests avowed itself the church, and the "Priests of the Holy Crater" and the "Priests of Crail" stood as one, and Deioces had to make permanent terms with the priests of Crail, whose mysterious caverns were in the mountain walls that surrounded his country, and for aught he knew, or ever did know, furnished a secret passageway into its very heart, the city of Baleria, over which they claimed certain vested rights that they would not surrender. Their claims were supported by the Holy Crater.

It developed that the Sapor was head of both the church and the civil government, as ruler over unknown numbers of Aryan clans, with an estimated population of one hundred million souls. Little more than this was known of the mysterious hordes calling themselves the Aryans and occupying the steppes about the Caspian sea. One thing, however, went unquestioned; the Sapor was master, and the triple alliance was the

Sapor's will. Deioces was fortunate in having placed the matter before that terrific power, thus bringing to his own support as head of the state the good-will of the greatest ruling spirit, perhaps, in all the civilized world.

To this constitutional convention the Sapor sent two delegates, one representing the government, and the other as the high priest of the church and head of the priests of the Holy Crater. Astyages, king of Persis, sent similar delegates.

Deioces sent Erskales, representing the government of Ironia, and Saranaces, representing the church, notwithstanding Cracillies was the acknowledged head of the priests of Crail; but this same Cracillies had openly avowed his undying hatred of Deioces as a traitor. Most of the priesthood stood with him. Therefore, Deioces started out under the code of the triple alliance with the ill-will of the church in his own kingdom. They named him "Deioces, the Upstart." It required many years to reach a common ground of understanding, the priests of Crail maintaining their exclusiveness and forbidding priests of the state to enter their strange place of abode.

Under the code of the triple alliance the priesthood was called the Holy Church and the state was called the Holy State. The head of the Holy Church, the head of the Holy State, and the king were a trinity to rule over the land, each having its specific duties defined by a code established by the triple alliance.

It would at once be seen that a man of Deioces' plotting nature would attempt to be absolute ruler through the connivance with his selected head of the Holy State, who was the delegate of his own choosing, Erskales. But even Deioces was unable to fathom the mysterious

depths of the influence of the priesthood. No one knew the origin of the institution that was as old, perhaps, as civilization itself. In fact, it claimed to be the founder and first school of progressive civilization on the part of mankind. It based its rights to help protect and rule the people upon the time-honored tenets that originally the church and state were one and the same governing power vested in a priest-king.

The church claimed a priority over the state because of the undeniable fact that governments rise, have their periods, and fall, while the church is universal, is nearest the people in time of stress, and never falls. It helps them to rejoice in times of prosperity, and helps to lighten their burden when distress and disaster overtake them. Such were the teachings of Cracillies, hence the antagonism between the new king, "Deioces, the Upstart," and himself.

While Deioces had no positive evidence proving it, he believed that Cracillies had had a hand in helping to spirit away the queen. That Cambyses was the chief instrument he knew, which fact forever barred the latter from Ironia while Deioces remained king.

The delivery to Phraortes of his queen and little son, he declared, was the restoration of more than half his kingdom, and it made him very happy. It bound Phraortes, Cambyses, and Cracillies in a bond of eternal friendship that brought splendid reward many years later.

Desiring to educate his son for future greatness, Phraortes went to foreign lands, remaining there until Cyaxares had grown to manhood. The queenly mother having died, the father and son had secretly taken residence in a country adjacent to Persis, in order to be in close communication with their friend,

Astyages, king of Persis, and in touch with the political situation in all that portion of the country, the son having gained the permission of his father to seize upon the first reasonable opportunity to dethrone Deioces.

Deioces had few friends and a multitude of enemies. He was counted the greatest despot of all known rulers. Both the Sapor and King Astyages had sent frequent protests and sharp warnings, but without avail. The triple alliance had kept peace between these three nations for thirty years, and as it had been intended as an example for all the balance of the world they were reluctant to enforce it by the sword. Nevertheless, Deioces' time was drawing near, and Cyaxares was on the alert. A spark would set the situation off, and he wanted to be prepared for the time. His friendships were the very best to insure a large and strong following.

Cambyzes was his constant aid and companion. He had brought him in close touch with the priests of Crail, and had been the medium of a long and earnest correspondence with Cracillies. He was ready for action and impatient to begin. Here was a singular case, a young prince, without money or men, planning a desperate warfare with him who had thirty years before usurped his father's throne. But his was a just cause, and he was promised the support of the king of Persis at the critical moment. The first war between the Medes and the Persians was brewing.

CHAPTER II

CYAXARES PLANS WAR AGAINST DEIOCES

THIRTY years after the formation of the triple alliance, between the Holy Crater, Ironia, and Persis, a commanding figure stood upon a promontory overlooking the fair plains of Ironia. Though a giant in stature, he had all the lines and graces of ripe young manhood. Notwithstanding his white, clean-cut features, with the finely chiseled brow, straight aristocratic nose, and soft brown eyes, and the great mass of curling brown hair that played about his face and shoulders, there was a general aspect of self-reliance and tremendous force. He was an exceedingly handsome man, what one would most likely call a kingly personage.

Even the deep lines that occasionally furrowed his brow lent charm of latent power to his thoughtful face. His pose was purposeful, and it needed no explanation to tell that there was some sinister meaning in his careful survey of the rich plain, spreading like a gorgeous panorama beneath him.

It was most suggestive that he was bareheaded and was enshrouded, from head to heels, by the ample folds of a long, dark cloak, beneath which could occasionally be seen the glint of polished armor. Moreover, he carefully kept behind him the black-green background of scrub cedars that covered the mountain sides, evidently to shield him from too critical eyes below.

There, stretching away toward the Persian gulf, was Ironia, the beautiful, and in her fair bosom lay

Baleria, the capital, the pride of Deioces. Like a gaudily bedecked harlot she lounged in sleepy languor in the embrace of the many arms of the delta, yet she was fair to look upon, and seemed a thing to receive caresses. This care-free aspect to the view seemed to move to deep anger the spectator of the promontory, for he muttered an oath, and twisted his strong, handsome features into a fearful scowl.

A low whistle brought four men, equally disguised, skulking along the fringing cedars. One of these bore his plumed helmet, another his ponderous sword, while a third held in his hand a roll of parchment; the latter appeared to be the superior of the others, for, upon orders from him, given in a low, cautious tone, they shrank deeper into the concealing shrubbery, while he himself came forward and placed the scroll into the hands of his chieftain. There was stern purpose in all this. They were not men to trifle, or to be trifled with. There was an easy familiarity between the two betokening a friendly confidence.

Prince Cyaxares, with Cambyses, his body-guard from boyhood, had endured the greatest personal discomforts and hardships to gain this vantage-point unseen. It was of vital importance that they succeed in making this reconnoiter without being discovered, and for the first time he was viewing little Ironia, the Ironia that Deioces declared he had built out of the mud of the Pol. It was now called "Little Paradise." Deioces had kept his word; Ironia was the most fertile and beautiful spot in Asia, and Baleria was the most splendid city in the domains of Ironia and Persis.

Deioces ruled there, Deioces, the usurper, the upstart! Once the trusted captain of guards of King

Phraortes, now king by base betrayal of that trust. It was true that he had made this magnificent spot, but in doing so he had ground the people into the dust, confiscated all that they could produce, and placed them in a state of hopeless slavery with scarcely sufficient left them to hold body and soul together. He had done more than this, much more, to make his name a byword throughout the civilized world; he had built Baleria, a cesspool of sin and wickedness, and had invited all the world to come, bring any new form of vice, and revel there. The lascivious and immoral practices licensed in Baleria were notorious throughout the world, and she was now a Mecca for the wicked.

Was it strange that Cyaxares gnashed his even, white teeth in rage and summoned his faithful Cambyses?

“Look! Cambyses,” he said, as he extended his great strong arm out toward the plain, “it is fair, yes, beautiful! But, Cambyses, Baleria must be purged of her vile populace. The flotsam and jetsam of all humanity has drifted into the delta to clog the mouth of the Pol; and, true to the law of drift and débris, they are piled here as the rubbish and broken refuse of the earth. This heterogeneous mass of noisome humanity is a menace to the morality of the whole world. Baleria, like Deioces, lives only for the luxurious present and without plan or purpose for the future. Their end is near.”

It was Deioces' wont to boast that an hundred miles of thong and lash had rendered Ironia as fertile and productive as the delta of the Nile. All its wealth he had lavished upon Baleria, which city, crowned by his magnificent palace of onyx, jade, and jasper, sat, like

the brazen mistress that she was, with her fringing environs draping gracefully and carelessly down from the citadel like a fantastically embroidered train that trailed along her water front and draggled in the sea, whence she derived most of her wickedness. It was by the gateway of the Persian gulf that wealth and spice-laden ships came to pay court to this fair charmer and partake of her pleasures.

With it all she was a tidy wench, jealous of her good looks and her personal cleanliness; she was almost human in this respect, compelling Deioces, her master, to lavish much wealth upon her toilet. With the exception of a few broad avenues her streets were narrow and winding, but extremely clean, even in the parts given over to the lower populace. At every available place were ornate decorations of pure white marble and onyx. Statuary, fountains, and elaborate façades were plentiful. The wider streets and spaces were a mass of well kept trees, shrubs, and flowers. Under Deioces it was a crime to desecrate any form of public ornament. In the midst of the city was a vast market-space divided into as many parts as there were definite divisions in the city.

Anything that added to Baleria's physical beauty, or moral pollution, was received with favor by Deioces, for he feasted his plebeian vanity upon the plaudits of those that superficially and loudly praised the city of his making, or profitably patronized its marts of wickedness. He himself openly patronized every form of immorality and encouraged it to thrive in new forms. These were world-known facts that Cyaxares knew, therefore he took grim satisfaction in this bird's-eye view, and pondered that thirty years of despotic rule and luxurious revelry, without interfer-

ence on the part of other nations, had rendered Deioces careless. A train of circumstances of his own laying would soon bring his proud head down into the dust of his marble streets, with his own purple robes as his only bier.

Cyaxares mused: "There can be no sin in these inanimate marbles, the glinting onyx, the sparkling fountains, and the verdure and flowers. These are the products of the sweat and blood and bone and sinew of the overwrought people. These should be cherished, preserved, and protected, when I have driven out Deioces, and cleansed the city of its vulgar riffraff, which have been imported and implanted here, to feast and fatten off the energies of the native people who are under the yoke of the despot."

"Come, let us see the maps," he said, as he spread the scroll upon a large flat surface and anchored the corners with stones. Then together they studied its every detail. It was a map of Ironia and the whole region thereabout. A separate parchment gave a detailed description of Baleria.

"Ah, my good Cracillies, when I am king of Ironia, you shall be the head of the Holy State for this favor, and you, my faithful Cambyses, shall be my chief adviser in all things that fall within my province under the triple alliance," exclaimed Cyaxares, with much feeling.

"I shall be content, Cyaxares, with your safety and pleasure," softly replied Cambyses, and they began to examine the map of Baleria.

"What are these broad, green lines running through that portion of the city below the palace?" asked Cyaxares.

"Ha, ha," laughed Cambyses, "Deioces' imported

vices began to come home and perch too near to the palace, consequently a reorganization of the city was made with a redistribution of the people which segregated them into classes, according to their degrees of badness; for instance, the so-called aristocrats reside in the circle that surrounds the palace; then, passing toward the sea, each dividing line marks a degree of degeneracy to the last section along the shores, where the ships unload their cargoes and permit their sailors to come ashore. There no law prevails; murder and robbery are not reported from that section; they are almost hourly occurrences. The section next to that is called the fishermen's section; not because it is given over to fishermen, but because of the seemingly simple fact that Crecies, Heppotes, and Feres reside therein."

"And who are these important personages, pray?" asked Cyaxares.

"They are by trade fishermen, but by profession the secret executioners for Deioces."

"Entitled to some distinction, truly," muttered Cyaxares.

Continuing, Cambyses said:

"The populace of one district is prohibited from passing to another district without a special permit issued by Paulius, Deioces' captain of guards. Should a person of one section be found in another without a pass a guard has the authority to apprehend him and to kill him on the spot, and have his body cast into the river, to be caught in the nets of Crecies, for which he claims a fee, then it is sent onward to the sea as food for the fishes. This is a daily occurrence, with no reports made to their superiors. Paulius is the genius of this whole arrangement, and a more con-

temptible human dog never barked. Deioeces chose well when he made Paulius his chief of guards in Baleria."

"What manner of man is this Paulius?" asked Cyaxares.

"A pompous, o'er important, ignorant ass; just the material from which to cast a murderous official, cowardly by nature, but bold under the protecting cloak of the law and official tolerance. A meaner coward never lived than Paulius the sheep-shearer, and a more cruel despot than the official Paulius could not be conjured out of ordinary clay."

"A good subject for reformation," laughed Cyaxares.

"Good bait for the sharks," growled Cambyses.

"I fear that you have designs upon Crecies' office, with its tempting fees. You shall be official shark-feeder, also," said Cyaxares. "But let us see what the avenues of attack, defense, and retreat are to this tight little state. I have personally examined but three of the five passes. What of the other two, Cambyses?"

"You are familiar with the passes of Ironia and Aryaosa. Regules' mountain house is at the outer part of the Ironian pass. You remember well a night we spent there."

"Ha, ha," laughed Cyaxares, "and I remember well, too, that Regules had a very pretty daughter, Scala, who dotes on one Cambyses."

"I would it were true!" exclaimed Cambyses. "I would make her my wife, for she is virtuous."

"And you beneath the same roof?" laughingly inquired Cyaxares.

"I speak in truth, Scala is no common woman, and her father, Regules, is a man of good parts. You shall

see, for we must go there again," said Cambyses earnestly.

"Take no offense, my good Cambyses, the two of us can protect the virtue of the charming Scala, and, should she prove worthy to be the wife of a courtly gentleman like yourself, there shall be a great wedding at Baleria," appeasingly spoke Cyaxares.

"Now, Cambyses, let us discuss the passes. The Ironian pass is the most difficult to defend because of its great width. I would rather know that the gorge was at the inner end."

"As long as Regules' wine lasted it would be a drunken battle," broke in Cambyses.

Cyaxares continued: "This is the pass through which Deioces would march his army, should he be coaxed outside of Ironia."

"Yes, and this would be the pass through which he would retreat, consequently he would take immediate possession of Regules' mountain house and strongly garrison this place," replied Cambyses.

"Did you say that this Regules is friendly to our cause?" asked Cyaxares.

"He is supposed to be friendly toward the priests of Crail."

"Then perhaps his wines may prove to be excellent war material after all. A drunken garrison is quickly demoralized."

"This is worth keeping in mind," replied Cambyses. "We must test Regules' friendship."

"An army could be slipped behind him through the pass of Aryaosa," suggested Cyaxares.

"Providing it came down through the pass of Derbend, between the Caucasus mountains and the Caspian sea, muzzling Massula and keeping well to the east

of Bagdad," replied Cambyses, following the course on the map with his finger.

Cyaxares looked questioningly at him for a moment, then said:

"What are you planning, a holy war?"

"That is your only hope, as I see it," cautiously replied the old warrior.

Cyaxares sat silent for a moment, then, arousing himself, he said:

"I do not believe that Deioces could take any advantage of the Persian gulf to aid him in warfare with a people on his north. He has not shipping enough to be called a sea-going nation. While he has commercial relations with many foreign countries, I do not believe any would come to his relief from the sea. In his commerce the world comes to him; he does not go to the world. This seems to be the secret key to his policy of a free and wicked city. Commerce and barter are but plausible excuses, for adventurous men of every class and calling to come here. Here they bring their exchangeable merchandise, leaving behind them in Baleria the wealth that they expend upon their personal joys and pleasures. This is the balance of trade in favor of Deioces, for he receives the larger portion of it indirectly in the form of a tax upon licensed crime, a most detestable thing in itself. I am told that when robbery occurs the victim is not spared to return to his home to tell a bad story about Baleria."

"And, no doubt, many a stranger's head bore the mark of Paulius' mace when Crecies' net caught him," muttered Cambyses.

"Again I say, Cambyses, you shall be official shark-feeder," said Cyaxares.

"For one night, that will be sufficient. I pledge

you now that after one night I shall resign the office," declared Cambyses.

"Oh, perhaps you will leave nothing more for an official fisherman to do, and we may discontinue the office," laughingly said Cyaxares.

For hours they pored over and discussed the maps. Sticking his sword into the soil, Cyaxares measured its shadow, and said,

"Come, we must prepare to go down into Baleria."

Cambyses rolled the maps into a tight roll, tied them carefully, and hid them about his person. Calling the men, they all passed cautiously along the ledge some distance, where Cambyses stopped and looked about, saying:

"This is the spot, I am quite sure. Yes, here is the grotto," and drawing back a clump of shrubbery, he drew forth quite a cumbersome pack, which, upon being spread out, was found to contain five priestly robes with the coarse waist cords such as were worn by the priests of Crail.

"Thoughtful Cracillies!" exclaimed Cambyses. "These are all for large men. They must have some big priests in there," and he helped Cyaxares to don his priest's garb, drawing the cowl carefully over his shock of auburn hair.

They were prepared for adventure, keeping their short side-arms concealed beneath their robes.

Cambyses drew Cyaxares aside, and, looking the younger man earnestly in the face, he said,

"You know the extreme dangers of this adventure?"

"Yes."

"You are hopeful of bringing war upon Deioces?"

"Yes."

"Your royal father will approve of your course?"

“Yes.”

“What will be your first step to raise an army?”

“I must admit, Cambyses, that I am more hopeful than sanguine. It is to be thoroughly prepared that I am taking these risks. I must confide to you a great secret. Notwithstanding the Sapor did not restore my father to his throne, there exists at this time a close friendship between my father and the powers of the Holy Crater. They have secretly given him assurance that, should a plausible excuse arise, the Sapor would send an army to depose Deioces and restore my father to his own.”

“The Sapor your father’s friend!” exclaimed Cambyses in utter astonishment.

“Speak not of it. We may not discuss that further now. I am looking for the plausible excuse. That is sufficient. Let us be going.”

“But, let me speak once more,” pleaded Cambyses. “You know what a holy war means. The fanatical Aryans will roll down upon these lands like the ungovernable tides of the sea. They will desolate these fair fields as the destructive locusts of Egypt, and you and your cause may be forgotten and submerged.”

“A wise thought, Cambyses, I thank you; that is my greatest fear, but the compensating thought is that Deioces will be destroyed.”

“You do not know these Medes either. They are as terrible as Deioces is cruel. They have learned their lesson well from him. When the Medes and Persians made war against Arya it was the Medes that perpetrated the cruelties. Deioces himself licensed the greatest outrages. Astyages threatened to turn his army upon that of Deioces without avail. Only the Sapor could stay the horrors of Deioces’ perpetration.”

“Yes, and by this Deioces lost to himself and Astyages the partition of the conquered land between them, the Sapor assuming a protectorate over the persecuted people. My father has told me of this. The Sapor has never forgiven Deioces for this. The people of Arya were of direct Aryan descent. Notwithstanding all this, Cambyses, Deioces will shrink from warfare with the Holy Crater, and an internal revolution will frighten your man Paulius into babbling idiocy.”

“I am at your command, Cyaxares,” replied Cambyses.

“This night we shall see Paulius, for we must go down to Baleria,” and Cyaxares motioned for them to start down the narrow trail leading to the plains below.

As they wended their way through the tangled shrubs and jagged stones, Cyaxares and Cambyses conversed in low tones.

“You are aware that I have not been in Baleria since the flight of my queenly mother bearing me in her arms, thanks to your courage, my good Cambyses. Of course I know that the Baleria that we shall see to-night is an entirely different city. That which I have been told about it will serve us little. Yet we may learn much by observation. These robes will pass us unchallenged from one district to another, so Cracillies informs me. You are aware, also, that he himself has been under the ban excepting in matters of the church; otherwise he would have doubtless accompanied us.”

“Does Cracillies know that you are to go to Baleria to-night?”

“No, I thought it more discreet to keep our visit

secret," replied Cyaxares. "I cannot help thinking that you may be taken for Saranaces," and he smiled upon Cambyses.

"Then Paulius will surely caress my head with his mace, for I understand there exists a great enmity between the two," replied Cambyses.

"Invite his attention at the best spot to fight it out, for your own truncheon is no toy," said Cyaxares. A grim smile covered Cambyses' face as he drew from beneath his robe a huge knotted truncheon and looked approvingly at it.

It was a long and tedious descent down the cliffs, but easy going when the bottom was reached.

"This is all guess work now," said Cyaxares. "The city does not encroach upon this side of the Pol. Doubtless we have wandered away from Cracillies' direction, for I see no landmark here to guide us. I presume that it is best to take a general course toward the city until we reach the river."

They soon found themselves following a narrow, winding path in a maze of bulrushes and marsh-grasses higher than their heads. In twenty minutes, in a direct line, they should have reached the bank of the river Pol; instead they were lost for one hour, suddenly coming upon a small landing not more than six feet square. It was almost hidden from view in the tall reeds.

"Ugh! this looks anything but cheerful. Surely we are on the threshold of Crecies' graveyard. I imagine I smell the odor of decomposing bodies," growled Cambyses.

"From the description I believe that that is Crecies himself in that boat," said Cyaxares, pointing to a lone boatman, slowly pushing his flat-bottomed boat along

the edge of the reed-clad shore. Opposite could be seen the ends of the streets extending down to the water's edge. They looked dark and gloomy enough, and Cyaxares and Cambyses wondered what part of the city it was. Probably, though, it was the fishermen's district, inasmuch as this boatman was hovering about the spot.

"Ho! Ho! my good fisherman, come ferry us across the river, and we will bless your nets," cried Cyaxares.

For a moment the burly man stood up and looked at them. He looked sullen and mean, but suddenly switching his pole he turned his boat about and pushed it to within a few feet of the platform upon which they were standing.

Again his impudent face surveyed them, and he brusquely grunted:

"I want none of your blithering prayers and I have no license to ferry strangers across the river at this unseemly hour. How do I know that you have a right to be in this district at all?"

At a venture Cyaxares took up the challenge.

"Since when has Crecies' license to do as he pleases after sunset been revoked? Since when have the priests of Crail been barred from any district in Baleria? If you do not want our blessings, perhaps better wine may be had for silver. We will pay you in the coin of the realm," and Cyaxares loudly jingled the silver coins in his hands.

"And why do you come this way to reach the city?" grumbled the fisherman.

"That is our affair, but as it is no secret we will tell you as we cross. Come, do you want the extra coin?"

"Keep still, I tell you I have no license. Get in, and hurry," and he pushed the boat against the platform, allowing them to step into the net-littered and loud-smelling craft.

With a strong push of his pole he sent his boat out into the water, nearly standing them on their heads.

"You are Crecies?" said Cyaxares.

"Since you know it, yes," was the gruff answer.

"Then it is easy for us to tell you where we are going, since we will ask you to direct us. Where may we find the best fish and the best wine?"

"You are a well-fed lot; you might try Heppotes' place. Paulius sometimes patronizes it. If it is good enough for Paulius, it is good enough for you night-prowling priests," growled Crecies.

"Very well said. For this bit of wit we will give you both prayers and money. You might direct us to this place, and pass word on to Heppotes to spare our lives, as you have absorbed all the money that we carry upon our persons," and Cyaxares poured a handful of coins into the big, greedy paw of Crecies.

The gruff fisherman only shrugged his humped shoulders and pointed up the dark street, saying,

"At the first flambeau," then he left them standing upon the bank.

"A cheerful murderer!" exclaimed Cambyses.

"But we shall dine elsewhere than with his *particeps criminis*," replied Cyaxares, and they hastened to get away from so dangerous a locality.

Had they watched the villainous Crecies as he disappeared in the darkness, they would have seen his huge frame shaking with suppressed laughter. Well did he know that these were not priests. More times than he could count the cassocks that he had lifted from the

slimy waters in his malodorous nets were empty, having served their purposes as disguises for those that risked their very lives in visiting the forbidden districts. They would have felt uncomfortable had they seen him suddenly thrust his hand into his pouch, examine the coins for a moment, then quickly thrust the nose of his boat into the shore, rush madly up the bank, and disappear in a dark street. Evidently something about this money, perhaps the indiscreet quantity of it for so trifling a favor, had awakened in him some furious thought. Perhaps these were real priests, and some serious intrigue was brewing which he could turn to new account.

It was most fortunate for Cyaxares and his party that they did not go to Heppotes' place, for a reception awaited them there that neither prayers nor coin could have appeased.

CHAPTER III

CYAXARES' ADVENTURE IN BALERIA

CYAXARES and his party were truly famished, having lived for several days on the scantiest foods. They had partaken of the simplest repast at the point where they had left their tired horses. It was essential to find some public house where they might get bread, meat, and wine. Baleria was noted as a place for a great variety of foods, especially fish of numerous kinds, therefore they were glad to locate a secluded little place out of which they had seen two priests emerge with their arms socially linked together in an exceptionally brotherly fashion.

Within they found an excellent eating-place with some half dozen priests quietly partaking of huge dishes of fish and rice, washing it down with copious draughts of rich red wine. Cautiously separating into two parties, they themselves partook of a generous meal, feeling much refreshed thereafter, and, like the well-feeling priests that had preceded them, arm in arm they passed out into the street. Upon turning an abrupt angle, the first startling thing to greet them was a wide façade ornamented with an immense fountain carved out of marble.

"Am I seeing double?" asked Cyaxares, rubbing his eyes, and staring at the fountain.

Around the base were life-sized figures of fishermen drawing nets, with men inside them instead of fish. Above this was a row of sharks with men struggling in their mouths.

"One of Deioces' refined satires. We are in the district of the fishermen," said Cambyses.

It was apparent to Cyaxares that they must drift aimlessly about, trusting to luck to guide them. Nevertheless, this monument had given them some definite idea regarding their position. They soon arrived at the next dividing avenue, and a beautiful wide street it was, with cooling, wide-leaved poplars, imported from Arya, extending in four long rows on the sides and through the middle of the streets. Great urns, filled with bright blooming shrubs and flowers, were interspersed between the trees, their fragrance, sweet and soothing, lulling them to a sense of rest.

"A strange contrast," remarked Cambyses.

"Delightful!" exclaimed Cyaxares.

"He shows brutally good taste," replied Cambyses.

"What is brutal about this?" asked Cyaxares.

"The lash and thong woven into its fabric and concealed by this sweet perfume," replied Cambyses.

"O yes, I understand," sighed Cyaxares.

At another fountain an old man stood, holding a cup filled with sparkling water, which he extended to them.

Cyaxares reached forth his hand to partake, but Cambyses withdrew the cup and dropped a piece of silver into the old man's hand. Cyaxares understood and they passed on; they were still in the danger zone, and robbery was no crime. It was needless to tempt fate. The criminals of Baleria were experts in making poisons from the wild cucumber, bitter apple, almond, and castor bean.

Cyaxares and Cambyses were discussing this problem when they were suddenly confronted by a large guardsman, accompanied by Crecies. They both

placed themselves on guard, and demanded to know the meaning of the intrusion.

“Show me your passes,” demanded the guard.

Cambyses slipped his hand beneath his priestly robe, but Cyaxares stayed him. Their three men in the background were quickly closing in on the intruders. An encounter seemed inevitable when a singular thing occurred. A strange priest stepped from the shadow of the wall and took a position by their side.

“Uncover and show your faces,” demanded the guard in a louder tone as he drew nearer to them.

The stranger threw off his cowl, and in a loud and angry voice exclaimed,

“Since when have you been given authority to challenge the priests of Crail in the streets of Baleria?”

Paulius, for it was he, recoiled and muttered,

“You!”

“I shall demand of Deioces an explanation of this.” Then the priest turned to the others and said in an authoritative voice:

“Pass on. You will not be molested.”

As he turned his face from Paulius, the latter quickly raised his mace to strike him a deadly blow. There were two quick thuds and Paulius and Crecies both lay stretched, senseless, upon the ground, while standing over their prostrate forms were the burly henchmen, Klapiés, Heptes, and Candes. They knew by instinct when to strike a blow.

Cyaxares looked inquiringly at the stranger. The latter stood for a moment contemplating the fallen men.

“I saw his upraised mace. It is the first time to my knowledge that a priest of Crail has been threatened by Paulius. Should they remain here they would come

around, and no report would be made of the affair. It is a common thing for Paulius to be mixed up in broils. But I deem it wise to put them out of the way for this night. Have your men bring the bodies here."

With Cambyses' aid the heavy hulks were carried through a doorway and deposited. In the dark background two figures were standing. The priest hurriedly whispered some instructions and again came to the street, closing and locking the door after him.

"And you?" demanded Cyaxares.

"Saranaces. At your service, Prince Cyaxares," was the startling answer.

Cyaxares caught his breath for a moment, while Cambyses started forward in surprise, for he had not seen the priest for many years.

Saranaces quickly drew his cowl over his face, and said; "Come, we must not remain standing here," and he walked quickly along the street with the others following after him.

The streets took on a decidedly different aspect as they drew nearer to the citadel, which loomed before them, a great pile of marble, jade, jasper, and onyx, glittering even in the darkness, as the breeze swayed innumerable hanging lanterns back and forth about its walls. It was surrounded by a high wall over the top of which peeped the foliage of swaying trees. It was known throughout the world as one of the most magnificent palaces ever constructed by a proud king. Cyaxares speculated inwardly as he gazed upon the glooming mass.

"It is the concentrated sufferings of my father's people, who would have been my heritage. It shall be mine by force, that I may make restitution to those that have been plundered," he muttered.

They were in a section of the city near to the palace when Saranaces stopped, unlocked, and pushed open a door, and bade them enter. Treading a long, stone-paved corridor, they reached an open court with numerous doors on its four sides. Pushing one of these open he bade Cyaxares and Cambyses enter, the others to remain in the court.

They were ushered through a series of low-ceilinged rooms, and into a similar one furnished with tables and chairs. A side door opened and another priest entered and heartily greeted them.

“Welcome, Prince Cyaxares! Welcome, my dear Cambyses! I thought you would tell me of your coming to Baleria.”

“Cracillies!” exclaimed Cambyses, and they embraced.

Placing his hands upon Cyaxares’ shoulders, he looked at the young prince admiringly, saying: “Thrice welcome, son of my friend.”

“What a fine fellow he is, to be sure. Your cause is just, you will make a great and good king, like your father, Cyaxares; you will win. An unexpected thing has happened to bring about exactly the conditions for which you have been waiting. Be seated, and we will tell you of it.”

Cyaxares suitably acknowledged the compliment, and they all drew near the table. Another priest had followed Cracillies into the room, but had remained standing in the shadowy background.

“This is a very strange coincidence, Cyaxares,” said Saranaces. “We knew not of your coming, and were gathering here to devise ways by which we could quickly communicate with you on a most important matter. A most unheard-of incident has occurred, which, if it be-

comes known, I fear may precipitate another holy war, and bring ruin down upon Ironia."

"It must be a grave matter. Pray tell me, for I am bursting with curiosity. Has it any material bearing upon my contemplated move against Deioces?" replied Cyaxares.

"It has everything to do with your case. It supplies you with an immediate reason for calling upon the Holy Crater. If carefully handled your fortunes are assured. If improperly handled, disaster will overtake us all."

"Do tell me the truth," impatiently demanded Cyaxares.

The priest in the shadow seemed to shift his position.

"It is this," continued Cracillies. "One week ago a rich caravan, traveling from Nineveh, was overtaken by a band of upland brigands. An Aryan princess was traveling in state toward the pass of Derbend, returning to her native home after a long sojourn in Nineveh and Babylon for the purpose of acquiring an education. Word came to Deioces of her great beauty and wonderful talents, and he sent an emissary to treat with the brigands for the possession of this beautiful young princess. The emissary was successful and returned bringing the lady back with him.

"Upon her arrival at the palace, believing that Deioces would not dare to detain or molest her, she declared her identity, and demanded an immediate escort to her native country. She had made the mistake, however, of keeping her identity concealed from every one else, and as soon as Deioces knew this she was at his mercy. He merely laughed at her threats. Now it happened that Salucia, of Deioces' palace, learned the

truth before the king had despoiled her, and last night she passed her through the secret gate of the wall of the palace and placed her, with all the facts, into Saranaces' hands, and we now have her concealed in this very place until we may safely conduct her to the caverns of Crail, where not even Deioces would dare to pursue her."

"And her identity?" asked Cyaxares with suppressed emotion.

"Madrilla, the daughter of the Sapor, King of Kings!" dramatically declared Cracillies.

Cyaxares sprang to his feet in his excitement, exclaiming:

"The Sapor's daughter! Do I hear aright? Call upon all the gods to protect us. Every one knowing this should at once be detained, that he babble it not in his sleep, for the moment that it becomes known to the Sapor, the Holy Crater will belch her clans down upon us, and there will be no Ironia. The Medes will be swept off the earth. It will precipitate a holy war of annihilation. There will not be enough heads in Ironia to pay the penalty, and Persis will be deluged. There is no telling where it would end. I believe it would mean death to the messenger even that conveyed the truth to the Sapor."

"Not if that messenger were Prince Cyaxares," gravely remarked Cracillies.

"Ah, I have light; my cause is won. If I can safely get away from Ironia, I see my way," said Cyaxares. "I shall start at once."

"Wait, I have a still greater surprise for you. The Sapor's daughter had a traveling companion, another princess, Almareta, daughter of Astyages, King of Persis. She is now here with Madrilla, and by a

miracle they are both chaste women, thanks to the good offices of Saluciea."

Cyaxares again exclaimed in surprise.

"Now you have your immediate cause for warfare against Deioces," continued Cracillies. "But you also have more reason to fear a deluge."

"It is a miracle, and we must act quickly. We must get the two princesses within the protecting environs of the caverns of Crail. Then I shall at once start upon my mission," declared Cyaxares. "In whose care are they now?"

At this question Cracillies sprang to his feet and began profusely to apologize to the priest who had all the while remained in the background.

"I really feel deeply mortified at my remissness, Bralezie; let me present you to the prince Cyaxares and to my old companion and friend, Cambyses," and he led the priest forward. "We contemplate giving the young women into his charge until we can safely convey them to the gardens of Crail. In fact I have just given to him the keys to these rooms, which are the rendezvous of the priests of Crail when in Baleria. He alone besides ourselves knows the secret," and he motioned to Bralezie.

In his excitement, Bralezie inadvertently allowed his cowl to drop back upon his shoulders, revealing his face in the full light.

Instantly Cambyses bounded toward him.

"That thing a priest! That scoundrel in charge of virtuous young women! A lower beast never lived. Better return the princesses to the brigands that first captured them. This is Zinkara, the secret spy of Deioces."

The man had slowly backed toward a door, and

while they all stood momentarily spellbound he sprang through the door and locked it between them.

"Go quickly, or you will find the young women gone," cried Cambyses.

Cracillies was first to awaken to the peril, and he gave quick orders.

"You, Cyaxares and Saranaces, remain here; come with me, Cambyses," and they darted out through the court, giving orders to the three waiting henchmen to detain any one attempting to pass. Then they reached the street, and hurried to the other side of the square to intercept Zinkara, should he attempt to flee with the women in that direction.

Upon reaching the door, Cracillies wailed,

"O, we are too late! Look here," and he held up the end of a woman's mantilla, which had been caught in the door and dragged from her. "They have gone this way. But some one is in there. The door is locked on the inside. This key that I have will not enter. Run, Cambyses, send your strongest man here to guard this gate. I will await his coming."

Cambyses hurried back to get Kapiés. A few minutes later they returned, to find Cracillies lying unconscious before the open door. Some one had emerged and struck him down.

They raised him to a sitting position, and he showed signs of returning consciousness, and in a few moments was able to reason again.

"Place me inside, and close the door. I will be all right. Leave me and hurry back. Saranaces will tell you where to go."

Cambyses quickly complied, and then returned to where Cyaxares and Saranaces were waiting, and briefly explained what had occurred.

“Come, they would not risk passing the door through which we entered, and the way to the palace by another street is long. Perhaps we may intercept them. They will make for the door in the dead-wall back of the palace.” Then Saranaces conducted them the shortest way to the dead-wall, arriving there in time to see two men, each carrying one of the young women, enter the door in the wall and slam it shut almost in their faces.

Thoroughly disappointed they stood silent for a moment, half concealed by clumps of shrubbery. Suddenly Saranaces pushed them closer into the bushes. A single figure was seen skulking along in the shadow of the wall and making for the door. As he drew near the shrubs he was pounced upon and muffled before he could utter a sound.

“It is Zinkara,” said Saranaces, as they secured his hands and feet. Bidding the henchmen take him up they hastened with him back to the rendezvous, where they thrust him into a secret dungeon. Cracillies had not been seriously injured, and though still dazed had made his way back to the chamber where he was impatiently awaiting their return. He was overjoyed to see that they had captured Zinkara. Both he and Saranaces explained that Zinkara, under the name of Bralezie, had been a trusted member of the brotherhood, and, doubtless, all this time had been a spy set upon them by Deioces.

Cambyses said that by accident he had seen him at Regules' mountain house, Regules himself having confided the truth to him. Zinkara had never seen Cambyses before, therefore had felt safe in the presence of the strangers.

Cyaxares was much excited. Pacing the floor in

the greatest impatience, he was thinking out some plan of action.

Stopping, he said:

“Bring me parchment and ink. We have Zinkara. His men have never seen me. I am going to present myself to Deioces as a messenger from Astyages, and demand the immediate surrender of both these princesses.”

“You go to Deioces!” exclaimed Saranaces. “Why it is death for one of his subjects to smile in his presence.”

“Yes, bring me the writing materials. I, fortunately, am not one of his subjects, and I shall not smile.”

Without further parley parchment and ink were brought. Cyaxares carefully prepared his demand upon Deioces, and then read it to the others:

“DEIOCES, KING OF IRONIA:

“On demand, surrender to the bearer of this order my daughter, also the daughter of the Sapor, as chaste as when you received them. Make full apology for the outrage, and return my messenger unharmed, or, by the eternal gods, all of the clans of the Holy Crater and of my domains will come upon you like a tidal wave to sweep you and your country off the earth. The heavens nor the earth will provide a hiding-place for your detestable head.

“ASTYAGES.”

Taking from his pouch a letter, which had been sent to his father by Astyages, he removed from it the seal of the king, and placed it upon this drastic message.

“This is the most outrageous thing that Deioces has ever attempted. His mind is full of trepidation and doubt in the dread fear of word getting out by

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which Astyages and the Sapor may learn the truth. It is while he is in this state of mind that I must strike him.

“You, Cracillies and Saranaces, remain here, for, should I succeed in getting possession of the princesses, I shall return here with them. I shall take Cambyses and his men with me, disguised as priests of Crail. If I fail, it will be no reflection upon you.”

“And you have the hardihood to demand an audience with Deioces to-night, and deliver this arbitrary message to him?” asked Saranaces, in astonishment.

“Within the hour,” replied Cyaxares.

Throwing off his own priest's garb, he stood, in his coat of mail, a splendid representative of King Astyages, even if he had forged his order upon Deioces.

“Resume your priest's garbs, Cambyses. Be prepared to receive the two princesses, Cracillies, for we shall return with them or the head of Deioces himself,” and Cyaxares passed out on his dangerous mission.

It was yet early in the night, and there were indications of revelry in Deioces' palace. The great bronze gates were open, and long rows of fantastic lanterns and sputtering flambeaux made the way to the palace portals as light as day.

Boldly approaching the gates, Cyaxares demanded immediate escort to the palace, saying,

“I am the bearer of an urgent message from King Astyages to King Deioces.”

The dignity of his bearing and his haughty importance caused the challenging guards to hesitate.

Drawing the parchment from his pouch, Cyaxares

exhibited Astyages' seal, and one of the guards conducted them to the doors of the palace, which were wrought of copper and inlaid with silver, an imitation of climbing grape-vines, the leaves and clusters of grapes standing out in bold relief in the light. A bold approach was made.

Here a more peremptory challenge stopped him.

"I am the bearer of an urgent message from King Astyages to King Deioces," he repeated, again exhibiting the seal of Astyages.

"The king cannot receive you to-night. He is in the midst of a great banquet," was the courteous answer on the part of a dignitary that had been summoned.

"I must leave here at break of day to-morrow morning for the court of Nabonassar. I cannot wait. This is a matter of life and death. Twenty thousand warriors, under arms, await the reply that I send back to King Astyages. Shall I send a message to him saying that Deioces is banqueting, therefore cannot give audience to his ambassador?"

This bold speech created a mild panic, and he was bidden to wait till Pinteles, the king's chamberlain, could be summoned. That dignitary came with alacrity, and asked that the message be delivered into his hands.

Cyaxares promptly replied that he was provided with full credentials to speak directly to the king himself, and none other but his hands could receive the message.

"Who are these priests?" asked the official.

"They are here to speak for the Holy Church, if need be," replied Cyaxares.

"How are we to know that you are what you repre-

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sent yourself to be?" indiscreetly asked the captain of guards.

"First, by this seal of King Astyages, and then by this sword, varlet," and Cyaxares quickly drew his short sword and struck the guard a smart blow across the shoulder with its flat side. "That for your insolence," he said, then turning to the surprised Pinteles continued:

"Act quickly. I have other important duties."

Instead of precipitating a fracas, as such overbearing conduct on the part of a messenger would ordinarily have done, Cyaxares' bold play exhilarated action on the part of the court officials. They were conducted to a large and luxuriously furnished room, and bidden to wait.

A half an hour later the chamberlain returned saying, with profound bows:

"The king will grant you audience. Permit your companions to remain here for your call." Then he was conducted to the audience chamber.

Deioces sat in a large, upholstered chair, surrounded by many pillows and cushions. In his hand he held a delicate ivory fan, with which his fingers constantly played. Unconsciously he was betraying his nervous strain to Cyaxares, who had been told in secret that this fan was only seen in Deioces' hands when he was much perturbed. But Cyaxares had instantly perceived a much more important signal of danger. The king's face was flushed with wine, and he might in this inebriated condition do something rash to upset Cyaxares' plans.

Deioces did not wait for the technicalities that court etiquette required, but said curtly,

"The message!"

The chamberlain took the message from Cyaxares' hand and placed it in that of the king.

Despite the rouge and paint upon his sallow cheeks, the hectic flush of the wine fled as he read the message, leaving his face spotted and of a mottled gray color. It had struck home.

A diplomatically phrased note would not have had this effect. The brutal and insulting character of the note indicated the deep anger of King Astyages. And had it been only Astyages, he would not have been so disturbed. But the Sapor! And perhaps even Nabonassor, with whom he had been on excellent terms, — that shook him with nameless fear.

Well did he recognize the enormity of this insult to other rulers, and he now had a wholesome fear of the consequences.

His haggard face grew purple; his lower jaw sagged; a far-off look came into his sunken, watery eyes; his hands visibly trembled, and he was a pitiable object. His own chamberlain, realizing the startling nature of the message without knowing its actual contents, was much perturbed.

Suddenly Deioces braced himself, half sprang from his seat, and screamed:

“It's a brazen lie! Neither of the wenches is in my palace.”

“Shall I take these words back to Astyages as your answer to his note?” calmly asked Cyaxares.

Deioces bit the blood from his lips in his suppressed rage, and as it flecked his flowing beard he wiped it away with the priceless lace upon his sleeve. Hot tears of vexation dimmed his eyes as he reread the insulting message, more to gain time to think than for any other reason. This terrible young man before him seemed

the message incarnate. His massive proportions, his kingly bearing, and his bold and fearless pose intimated determination and power. It was useless to vent his wrath upon Cyaxares' person. To do so could only make matters worse. Did the note not say, "Return my messenger unharmed?"

He took his time to frame a verbal reply to the note. Cyaxares plainly saw that he had won so far as convincing Deioces of the authenticity of the message was concerned, but he well knew that more serious matters must follow. Suppose Deioces really did not know that the young women had been returned to his palace; he could truthfully say that they were not there without admitting that they had been there. It would be presuming too much to ask if they had; there was a danger line in dealing with a drunken king. Notwithstanding Cyaxares had coolly calculated upon rolling Deioces' head upon the floor, should necessity require it, that would not serve his purpose and would, doubtless, cost him his life.

Suppose Deioces was aware of their return and should lie to him and say they were not in his palace, then he must frame a bold story that would prove they were, and yet not declare that the king had wantonly told a falsehood. Here was dangerous ground to cover. Under no circumstances could the king confess his guilt.

Again drawing his lace sleeve across his mouth and chin, Deioces said:

"You may give my compliments to Astyages, and tell him that on my honor I declare that neither his daughter nor the daughter of the Sapor is in my palace, nor to my knowledge in Baleria. I will make diligent inquiry into this matter at once, and I shall

send a messenger to him setting forth the facts as I learn them," and he arose as if this ended the interview.

Deioces had by this careful phraseology evaded the truth as to their having been in his palace, but there was in it the ring of possible ignorance of their having been returned there that evening, doubtless because that was his night of debauch, and he had ordered the chamberlain not to disturb him. Taking this view, Cyaxares approached the delicate ground.

"I regret to have to remind your Majesty that the two princesses have been brought into your palace without your knowledge, and doubtless without your consent, this very evening. They are now in concealment here. Therefore, in full compliance with the instructions of King Astyages, I must demand that they be immediately placed in my keeping, to be returned in safety to their respective homes."

"Insolence! How dare you know so much about my palace?"

"Command your servants to produce them."

"Must I tolerate this insolence?"

"I assure your Majesty that no insolence is purposely intended. I know whereof I speak when I declare that these two young women are without your knowledge concealed within these palace walls. I will inform you that the whole church of the triple alliance is in a rage over the matter, and it is from the Holy Church of Baleria that I get my information. Your official, Zinkara, has confessed to having secretly sent the two princesses here, and they are here now."

Instead of resenting this bold speech Deioces turned a look of wrath upon Pinteles, who attempted to explain.

"Are they here?" roared Deioces.

The chamberlain bowed his head in reply.

"Conduct this gentleman to the blue room until you can prepare the princesses for travel, then bring them here." Turning to Cyaxares, he said: "I deeply regret this. Inform Astyages that I shall at once send an ambassador to him with my message. The princesses will be placed in your care." Then Cyaxares was conducted to an adjacent room to await developments.

What snare was being laid? That some treachery was intended was certain. Deioces would not thus permit himself openly to be convicted. He looked to see if the priests were still in the waiting-room. They were, and he felt more comfortable.

After half an hour's wait the chamberlain returned accompanied by two muffled figures, but Cyaxares demanded that their faces be unmasked. After some parley about this the muffled figures were taken from the room and another wait of twenty minutes occurred. Cyaxares became suspicious and restless. He walked out to where Cambyses and his companion were seated, and began to converse in low tones with Cambyses. They all rose and started slowly toward the doorway, as if being impatient with the delay. Immediately Pinteles, with two of his guards, appeared, almost dragging into the room two drooping figures. They were undoubtedly the two princesses.

"Uncover their faces," commanded Cyaxares.

Reluctantly Pinteles obeyed, and removed the scarfs that were tightly bound about the scared but beautiful young faces of the women.

Upon seeing the commanding figure of Cyaxares, accompanied by the priests, the two women at once fell

down before him, and begged his protection. Pinteles approached to lift them to their feet.

“Stand away! Touch them not!” commanded Cyaxares. Then lifting the women to their feet, he bade Cambyses and his men support them, and started toward the palace doors.

“You are to take them out by way of the secret gate,” said Pinteles, and he and his guards essayed to pass between them and the door.

“What is the meaning of this? Would Deioeces bid Astyages or the King of Kings to enter this palace by a back way? Then why do you require their daughters to pass out by such way? I would not dare return to them, did I permit this indignity,” and Cyaxares boldly bade his men proceed.

There was a suspicious rustling of a curtain, and at some mysterious signal Pinteles and his men withdrew.

“Go quickly; there is intrigue going on here. We are not free to leave the palace grounds!” Cyaxares whispered to Cambyses.

A guard swiftly passed by them and toward the great gates of the palace grounds. When they themselves arrived, the gates were being closed. They were ponderous things and could not be quickly adjusted, which gave the party an opportunity to prevent their being closed.

“Throw off your robes and give me three of them. Hold the guards back until we are out of sight,” hastily demanded Cyaxares.

In an instant a priest's robe was cast over each of the women, while Cyaxares donned one himself. Cambyses and his men had so taken the gate-keepers by surprise that they not only prevented the gates

from being closed until Cyaxares and his charges had fled through them, but also held the guards at bay until they themselves had brought the two great gates in place and thrown the outer chain across them and over a hook, to prevent their being followed. Not until this was accomplished did Cambyses express surprise that not an outcry had been made. Evidently Pinteles had commanded this, not desiring to create a sensation that could not well be explained.

Cyaxares hurried the two women on toward the rendezvous where Cracillies and Saranaces were impatiently waiting. At the door stood two stalwart men, who immediately attacked Cyaxares, who pushed the young women behind him, telling them not to flee. The palace guards, for so they proved to be, had Cyaxares at a disadvantage because of their longer weapons, but his prodigious strength and great agility enabled him to hold them at bay until Cambyses and his men came up and quickly had them down. Fortunately the priests within had heard the clash of arms and stood ready to pass them in through the door, and drag the two fallen guards inside and bar the door before the shuffling feet of the other approaching guards could turn the corner and see where they had taken refuge.

"You may, and you may not, be safe," declared Cracillies. "That wholly depends upon circumstances."

The women were much frightened and clung to Cyaxares as their rescuer, for they well knew that they had had a narrow escape in getting away from the palace of Deioces.

"I charge you with their protection, Cambyses," said Cyaxares. Then he, Cracillies, and Saranaces

drew apart to consult. The two wounded guards were being taken care of in the outer court by Cambyses' men.

"Let us quickly analyze the present situation," said Cyaxares.

"We must first find out who these men are, who knew how to anticipate your return here. I am hopeful that they are the men that assisted Zinkara in taking the princesses back to the palace, the same two that you saw enter the gate in the dead-wall, bearing the women in their arms. If this should be true, it is quite possible that no one at the palace has been fully informed of this rendezvous. The capture of Zinkara is the key to the situation, for doubtless he alone would make the report to Pinteles."

Cyaxares hurriedly explained what had occurred at the palace, after which Cracillies expressed himself as being doubly assured of their present safety.

"We have a means of knowing more of the situation at the palace. You, Saranaces, go and have the two men thrown into the dungeon with Zinkara. Cyaxares and I will go to the secret adjoining cell," and Cracillies led Cyaxares to a narrow chamber, in the wall of which was a hidden door entering a small cell. This they entered and then they waited. They were in total darkness. Soon thereafter a faint light appeared through a narrow slit in the wall. Two men were quickly thrust into the adjoining cell, and the light disappeared.

With a vicious curse Zinkara greeted the newcomers as they tumbled into the same cell with him.

"Who are you?" he demanded.

"I am Moseus, body-guard to Deioces," replied one of the newcomers.

A bitter laugh from Zinkara greeted this.

"I am the devil, you are my body-guard. Now, you fool, how came you here?"

"Perhaps by the same course that put other fools in here. Who are you that calls me fool for being in the same plight as yourself?" growled Moseus.

"It ill becomes us to quarrel here, Moseus. I am Zinkara. Evidently we are both fools, if being in this infernal hole makes us such. But did you get those troublesome wenches safely back to the palace? Is this Manlies with you?"

"Yes, I am the third fool making the devil's triple alliance," growled Manlies.

"By the ashes of all the priests in hell, I cannot tell you if Deioeces himself lives. My head is like a box of bees, I am sopping in my own blood, and I saw Manlies go down from a stroke to kill an ox. Isn't that so, Manlies?"

"Yes, I know not whether I am dead or alive, but I do know that one thousand men like those attacking us could conquer all the clans of the Holy Crater."

"What did they look like?" asked Zinkara.

"Like devils. They wore tunics of plaited bull-skin, with basinetts of linked chains, which fell back upon their necks like a priest's cowl," replied Manlies.

"What's this! What's this! Why, according to this description, they are from the Holy Crater," exclaimed Zinkara. "I wonder if the Sapor can possibly know that the Princess Madrilla is a captive of Deioeces?"

"Ah, that's the thing, wait till I tell you," excitedly broke in Moseus.

"We carried the fair ladies through the gate in the dead-wall and to Pinteles' waiting room. Word

came that Pinteles was with the king. We waited for a while, and no instructions coming, I went in search of Pinteles. I reached the long corridor between the waiting chamber and Deioces' private audience chamber, when I heard loud voices. Hiding myself in the hangings I saw and heard all that passed.

"A messenger had arrived from King Astyages, and it evidently had something to do with the two women prisoners, and, from what I heard, one must be the daughter of King Astyages and the other the daughter of the Sapor, as you have just confessed, for we did not know!"

"Moseus, your tongue should be cut from your mouth, but go on," said Zinkara.

"This ambassador had with him four priests of Crail, so every one believed, but they were these devilish Aryans in disguise. He knew his business and had Deioces shaking like a leaf, and Pinteles ready to flee. He demanded the immediate possession of the two princesses. The king ordered Pinteles to bring them. Then I fled back to Pinteles' waiting room, where I had left Manlies with the women. Pinteles came and excitedly ordered us to put the ladies in the 'singing room' and to bundle up two of the kitchen scullions so that they could not be recognized and bring them to the blue room, which we did."

Zinkara laughed aloud and exclaimed:

"Great! Who would have believed the fat-headed Pinteles capable of such a ruse, and the red-haired ambassador from Astyages took one of these buxom scullions in his husky arms and fled with her, eh?"

"Red hair, how did you know his hair was red?" asked Moseus. "But you are mistaken, the red-haired ambassador demanded to see the ladies' faces. Pinte-

les, changing his plan, ordered the scullions returned and the ladies themselves brought up. He instructed us to take immediately a position at the small gate in the wall to intercept them as they came out, to kill the men and return the women to his waiting room. He believed the men to be priests of Crail, and so did we, therefore we believed the women would first be brought back here. We are fools, Zinkara. When we learned that they had escaped by way of the great gates, Manlies and I saw where we could distinguish ourselves, so we made a mad rush for the door that enters here. This big ambassador came with the women, and he held us off until his henchmen came. They proved to be these Aryan devils, and here we are. Now, are we bigger fools than yourself?"

"Maybe not. You, of course, told Pinteles where you were going?"

"No."

"What! Did you not tell him whence you had brought the women, and where you had left me?"

"We had no opportunity to tell him. Moreover, you had sworn us to secrecy, and we were momentarily expecting you. How could we tell that you had been captured?"

"Yes, we are all truly fools," moaned Zinkara. "The priests of Crail will leave us to rot here. Can you add anything to this tale of woe, Manlies?"

"Yes, I can add much in few words. This, in my opinion, is a bad mess, and means trouble for Ironia."

"This is no place nor time to air your wise opinions. Even we fools can see all that," grumbled Zinkara. "And now this big, red-headed giant, he is an impostor. He was the same as was here when I had you carry the fluffy darlings away from here. He

is Cyaxares, the son of Phraortes. One of the priests was Cambyses. Damn him, he kicked me in the face at the palace gate. Cyaxares was no messenger from Astyages. The first he knew of all this was told him here by Cracillies. The rest is all his imagination, and there is a bold one for you."

Both Moseus and Manlies expressed their surprise.

"Oh, I forgot, he also told Deioces that the whole church of the triple alliance was wild with anger over this outrage and that you, Zinkara, had confessed to having secretly brought the princesses to the palace, upon Deioces declaring they were not there."

Zinkara groaned aloud.

"And Paulius is missing; half the palace guards are searching the city for him," said Manlies.

"I believe Paulius is disloyal to Deioces," said Zinkara.

"And Paulius believes the same of you," replied Manlies.

"It is probably because we have never worked together harmoniously that we have this mutual distrust of each other; but it would be a relief to know that he, too, is sweating and swearing in a cell."

"It is as natural for a guardsman to hate a spy as it is for a priest to hate the devil," muttered Manlies.

"And vice versa," retorted Zinkara.

"I would surrender my commission to get the hide of Tulus," growled Moseus.

"Ha, Tulus, the spy of the people? It would be something to put him away; he is, though, the spy of the holy priests of Crail in truth," said Zinkara.

"I have heard it said that Tulus is none other than Saranaces himself," remarked Moseus.

"Who told you that?" asked Zinkara.

"Paulius."

"And how did the dull-witted Paulius become so surcharged with wisdom that he must unburden his mind of so important a matter to a guardsman?" demanded Zinkara.

"He was told by Scala, daughter of Regules, he of the mountain house in the Ironian pass," retorted Moseus.

"I should deem this good information, did I know that Paulius had ever known Scala," said Zinkara.

"Do you not know that Scala comes here secretly to visit Salucia?"

"I do not!"

"It is true, nevertheless, and Paulius is vain enough to believe that he has made an impression upon her. I heard Paulius tell Erskales, of the Holy State, that Scala knew that Saranaces and Tolus were one and the same, and had so informed Salucia."

"Why does Scala come here? This is a strange piece of information. Her father is under the ban," said Zinkara.

"I do not know, but there seems to be much affection between Scala and Salucia, for they both weep upon meeting, and at such times they go into seclusion."

"Does Deioces know this?"

"I do not know. It is not my affair. They have both been kind to me," replied Moseus.

"It would be a thing worth knowing to learn who is being betrayed, for Regules is the go-between for the priests and the people, and Scala quarrels regularly with him, threatening to leave him."

"What has this gossip to do with getting us out of here?" exclaimed Manlies.

“It all has a direct bearing upon getting us in here,” declared Zinkara.

The prisoners now began alternately to curse and to groan.

Believing that they had heard about all they could learn, Cyaxares and Cracillies withdrew. There was much for them to think about in what they had heard.

CHAPTER IV

THE PILGRIMAGE TO THE SHRINE OF THE HOLY STATE

CYAXARES, Cambyses, Cracillies, and Saranaces sat till nearly dawn, discussing every phase of the exciting events of the night. It seemed reasonably certain that a kind fate had wrought a singular combination of circumstances favorable to the cause of the young prince.

Paulius, one of the most cunning and cruel men in Deioces' employ, was safely tucked away. Zinkara, the spy and one of the most important aids of the king, was muzzled, and by no means an unimportant personage in Deioces' combination of criminals, Crecies, the fisherman, was locked up. The two young princesses were for the time being safe from the lustful Deioces. Had they designed all this, it would have been impossible for them to have accomplished it in a single night.

And the coming day was even more a stroke of good fortune, the day of the annual pilgrimage of the priests of Crail to pay their respects to the shrine of the Holy State, over which Erskales presided, a national day of great importance.

The priests of Crail formed in procession and marched to the church of Erskales, where the perfunctory exercises were of short duration, consisting mainly of an exchange of hypocritical vows of loyalty to the triple alliance and to one another on the part of the priests of the Holy Church and those of the Holy State.

It had been the custom for Deioces and all his high officials to attend this function, but word came from the palace that morning that the king was indisposed and would not be able to participate, but would designate one to act for him.

After the morning services the day became one of wild and lawless revelry, the festivities lasting till night-fall, when all were required by law to return to their respective districts. On this occasion all Baleria went into disguise, the men wearing priests' garbs and the women principally the garb that nature gave them, enhanced by a covering of gauze. The wildest revels prevailed. All law was suspended, and the people were licensed to do as they pleased. Delegations from all over the world came to participate in this feast of unlawful liberty, the price of the surrender to the ruling powers of all their rights, on the part of the people.

It was a most fortunate condition under which to spirit to safety the young princesses, and to enable Cyaxares and his men to leave Baleria unmolested.

It was essential for Cracillies and Saranaces to attend officially the exercises at the shrine of the Holy State, and it was decided that under their guidance and protection Cyaxares could join in the pilgrimage and view these ceremonies.

After two hours of essential rest and a frugal breakfast, Cracillies made known his presence at the door of the semi-comfortable chamber occupied by the princesses. They were quite calm and prepared to receive him. Dishevelled as they necessarily were, they were beautiful young women. Their bright young faces were little affected by much weeping and recent fright, the tension having relaxed in the belief that they had been taken to at least temporary safety. They were

both anxious to know more concerning the splendid nobleman who had so boldly taken them from Deioces' palace, but Cracillies denied them this privilege.

Every precaution was taken to insure their comfort and safety during the absence of Cyaxares, Cracillies, and Saranaces at the ceremonies. After this they were to join the revelries in the streets of Baleria, and make their way to the safe environs of the gardens and caverns of Crail. Cambyses and his three guardsmen were to remain there to protect the fair prisoners.

Groups of priests could be seen hurrying toward the great central thoroughfare, at the head of which was situated the grand edifice presided over by Erskales. While there were no guards in sight, the people, gathering in thousands along the sides of the boulevard, respectfully kept this street clear for those who were to participate in the parade.

All the priests had their heads and faces fully concealed by their cowls, this being a day for masquerading.

Three unusually large priests leisurely sauntered toward the head of the half-formed procession and seemed to be in earnest discussion over the occasion.

Cracillies and Saranaces, keeping Cyaxares between them, took their positions near the head of the procession, and soon the whole body began moving in solemn silence toward the church. Not a sound, beyond the soft tread of several hundred feet, could be heard. In awed silence the people stood along the way, and would so remain for an hour, when these priests would return, and at a given sign bid them be of a happy and cheerful mind, that all the vows and pledges between the Holy Church, the King, and the Holy State had been renewed.

The ceremonies in the church were imposing. Erskales, in his robes of state, accompanied by an array of assisting prelates, received the pilgrims, as the parading priests were called, with seeming great cordiality. All in front of the bar were required to uncover, but, it being a well-known fact that many foreigners were permitted to view the grand spectacle in the guise of priests, the great mass of marchers were not required to remove their cowls unless they so desired. This permitted Cyaxares to take a position of vantage and view the proceedings without risk of recognition. Then the reader for the Holy State came forward and read the declaration of the triple alliance:

“ In the beginning of civilization it became manifest that there should be a ruling spirit or head to the community. It was natural to select the father, if the community consisted of one family, or choose the wisest among the fathers, if it consisted of more than one family. Government and religion were one, both meaning the welfare and advancement of the people, physical and spiritual.

“ The head of the family was called father.

“ The head of a community of families was named the father-priest.

“ The head of a community of communities was named the priest-king.

“ As mankind increased and the spiritual and material welfare of the people assumed two distinct phases of civil government, it became essential to separate these, one being named the Church, the duty of which was to guard the spiritual welfare of the people, while the other was named the State, the duty of which was to look after the material welfare of the people. The two combined represented a dual government.

“ It came to pass that the power of one branch of government was greater than that of the other, and where the

priest-king was one ruler it became necessary to elect two separate heads, the one the head of the Church, and the other the head of the State. Consequently, through long periods of time there gradually grew up an antagonism between the Church and the State that gave constant cause for disputes of authority. .

“ In later times a still more intricate and complicated condition arose, when the Church and the State assumed to be separate and distinct institutions from the nation itself, claiming vested rights in property, and an independence of each other and of the will of the people at large. Education was pitted against entrenched, political power of government, and the common people suffered thereby. They could surrender neither, and partiality to one generally resulted in terrific revolutions and bloody warfare. Time and careful training having strongly established the Church in the superstitions of the people, and power having entrenched the government, calling itself the State, these two permanent institutions, for their own protection, secretly agreed to divide the power to rule over and determine the destinies of mankind.

“ From time immemorial, by convention and covenant, the Church and the State had stood together for their own support and perpetuation until a double-headed, ruling aristocracy dictated and executed all the laws by which the masses, the millions, were kept under control.

“ Thirty years ago, in their generosity and wisdom, the rulers over the great clans of the Holy Crater, Ironia, and Persis, conceiving a plan whereby the people at large might be rescued from this condition of non-participation in their own government, formed a triple alliance, and entered into a convention and covenant to establish and maintain a form of government that would insure to the masses a voice in making and executing the laws.

“ This triple alliance, guaranteeing to the people a just and equitable conduct of the national affairs, has withstood the test of time. Peace has prevailed between the contract-

ing nations, and an unprecedented prosperity has continued to exist.

“As it has been the annual custom to renew the covenant, we have gathered here to prepare the delegates with credentials from the Holy Church, the King, and the Holy State, to do which these three institutions constituting our triple form of government will, through their respective representatives, renew their oath of allegiance to the triple alliance. Cracillies will sign for the Holy Church, Saranaces has been designated to sign for the King, as head of the government, and Erskales will sign for the Holy State, representing the people.

“As this occasion has heretofore been set aside as a day of rejoicing and revelry, if there be no objections, we will hasten these ceremonies that the people may make merry.”

With unusual alacrity and promptitude all the signers stepped forward and affixed their signatures to the great scroll, and with equal promptness the same three men were designated as delegates to the next annual conclave to be held at Ecbatana.

As Cyaxares listened to all this cant and hypocrisy, and realized that both Cracillies and Saranaces were willing parties to it, he was appalled at the hopeless condition of the masses. They were in a known state of abject slavery, and here was a new power building up a third institution to impose upon and bleed the masses. He was so thoroughly disgusted that he regretted having come to see these ceremonies.

Immediately after the ceremonies Cracillies hurried to Cyaxares' side, and the two returned to the rendezvous. Saranaces was to follow shortly.

All preparations were made for an early departure. Before they had all donned their disguising priests' garbs, Saranaces came, bearing in his arms long staffs

with large vari-colored plumes at their upper ends, such as would be in the hands of every reveler in the streets.

Cracillies and Cyaxares were to take Madrilla between them. Saranaces and Cambyses were to take Almareta, and the three guardsmen were to bring up the immediate rear. Thus they secretly left the rendezvous by way of a secluded façade, and they soon found themselves in the midst of a maelstrom of excited humanity. All laws were suspended.

For this one day of unbridled licentiousness the people willingly surrendered their rights to participate in their own government. The whole world has subsequently been ruled by these same conditions. Profitable crime can always buy a license. Every governing body, religious or civil, has always had its price.

It was a perfect day in midspring, which meant much in little Ironia. The broad-leaved trees were gently moved by the cool breezes. Every variety of blossom and flower opened wide its mouth, hungry for the sunshine. Jasmine and honeysuckle fought with each other for vantage-points from which to exhale their wondrous odors. Daffodils nodded as if bowing a "Good morning"; climbing roses spread their foliage profusely to hide the pretty, eager faces and bright eyes peeping from the hidden verandas, while the roses filled the air with their sweet fragrance.

Baleria was renowned for feminine beauty, and this was beauty's day.

It was ideal in its outward aspect, but Baleria was about to throw off the satin skin of the tigress that she was. Like new-born butterflies, fresh from their silken shells, came the beautiful women to dance in the sunshine, and Baleria danced in the nude.

Deioces had planned well in establishing his city of pleasure. Cruel in his eviction of things, crude and homely to the eye, he had made his city physically clean and wholesome, and celebrated for bad men and handsome women.

The women were seldom seen upon the streets. They sat in silken hammocks, or lounged upon low, padded mats, behind the rose and jasmine-clad lattices, the floors of which brought their eyes on a level with the eyes of those that passed in the streets. Like little serpents they lay there to charm their passing victims, the lattices oftentimes being more fully clad than their shapely forms.

But this was all changed on this great festival occasion. Every man was an amorous priest and every woman a willing temptress. All classes were leveled to a licentious equality.

It had been the custom of Deioces himself to indulge in this freedom in close disguise.

The women swarmed into the streets in the gauziest of garments, which only enhanced and emphasized their nudity, making them more tempting and tantalizing in their wild frolicking. Feeling the freedom and unrestraint of their license, they were filled with joy. Their eager, laughing eyes sparkled like jewels. Their features, with the exception of their bright eyes, were concealed by many folds of a dark scarf. Up to the crime of taking human life every conceivable indiscretion went unchallenged. The priests themselves had to make sure of the security of their own cassocks with these untamed merrymakers.

Under these seemingly favorable conditions, there was little likelihood that Cyaxares and his party would be recognized. Much, however, depended upon Deioces'

attitude in consequence of the mysterious disappearance of both Paulius and Zinkara, upon whom he wholly depended for his personal safety. It was perfectly fair to assume that they were both loyal to Deioces. It was a serious matter for him to attempt to leave his palace without their having first safeguarded his course, for on these fête days his enemies swarmed in disguise through all the streets. The hard-driven people outside the city had no love for Deioces, and he knew it. The dagger was always awaiting his identification. Many times he dared not resent the insults that he heard heaped upon his name. He could expect nothing else, for he was cruel and unjust. He took it all with a philosophical indifference, laughing at his own unpopularity. It was noticeable, however, that the hang-overs found the next morning outside their own districts were treated with unusual brutality.

Before leaving the rendezvous, Cracillies had secretly visited the place where Paulius and Crecies were confined, to make sure that all was well there. He had also provided Zinkara and his companions with bread and water. It was hard on all these that they had to be deprived of the joys of fête day, especially on old Crecies, who was so ugly that he could only indulge in pleasure in disguise.

Upon Cracillies' order Paulius and Crecies were chained to the wall, at which indignity Paulius swore he would pick the flesh off Cracillies' bones bit by bit, and Crecies swore that he would feed it to the sharks out of his own hands. But this had gained for them neither sympathy nor liberty.

The streets were crowded to suffocation, and still the people pressed in. Tinkling bells, tambourines, and stringed instruments were plentiful. Cyaxares

was amazed, and the princesses shocked, at what they saw. Practically nude women were everywhere. Men carried them in their arms or upon their shoulders. They danced in circles about the priests, who openly attempted to seize and embrace them. In their disguises priests could not be distinguished from laymen. Long lines of these beautiful nymph-like creatures would form on either side of a rope woven of roses, then at a given signal they would dance down the street, holding a tambourine in one hand for the one directly in the rear to kick gracefully with regular, rhythmic precision.

It was tremendous sport. Its immorality and impropriety were lost sight of in the hurly-burly excitement.

Madrilla clung closely to Cyaxares' arm as they pressed their way through the ever increasing throng. Cyaxares began to realize that he had by his side a beauty which, perhaps, would surpass anything that they had seen. Madrilla's musical voice began to thrill him as none other had. Her soft warm hands began to make his blood tingle. In all the haste and excitement no thought of love or passion had entered his mind, but now in the midst of all this hilarity the same devilry that is born in every man was aroused, and he found himself more attentive to the fair companion at his side. Her face was swathed in a disguising scarf beneath the cowl, but occasional flashes of sunny brown hair and big blue eyes began to burn their way through his thick cassock and into his virgin heart. Yes, he felt the presence of a superior woman who had placed her confidence in him, and it thrilled him.

Finding it each moment more difficult to proceed, they decided to keep in a more compact body, in order

to make better progress toward their objective point, the bridge crossing the river toward the caverns of Crail.

Here and there eddies and whirlpools of demented humanity would form impenetrable circles to watch some grotesque or graceful performer. Once within the grasp of these swirls there was no escape until they were, by common consent, broken up to be reformed about some other dancer.

At times the whole street full of people would take a sudden swerve, turn and press back upon itself. Cyaxares once found it necessary to lift Madrilla bodily in his arms and carry her to safety. This was dangerous business. She clung to him as if she had been seized with the hysterical passion of the women about them, and liked it. Cyaxares patted her affectionately upon the shoulder encouraging her not to be frightened, but he saw that it was inevitable that they would be separated in this mad crush, therefore he hastily had Cracillies pass the word to make their way to the bridge as a place of rendezvous, should they be broken apart.

This precaution had hardly been taken when a tremendous wave swept them off their feet scattering them like chaff. When Cyaxares recovered himself he was horrified to find Madrilla no longer at his side, and not one of his party could he recognize. At this critical moment rude hands snatched away his cowl, permitting his auburn locks to fall about his shoulders, exposing his handsome features.

Instantly he was surrounded by a bevy of plump damsels, who joined hands and began to dance in a circle about him. An unusually handsome woman pushed her way through the crowd, broke the circle, and threw

her arms about him. It was impossible for him to release himself by force, and to be rude to the woman might precipitate an avenging mob.

He had observed from time to time that the revelers seemed to be using in common the numerous verandas on both sides of the street. Realizing the great danger of being recognized he quickly made up his mind what to do. Lifting the splendid form in his arms he plowed his way toward the nearest veranda, ran up the few steps, and was soon concealed behind its leaf-clad lattices.

Placing the willing young woman in a silken hammock he looked about. Everything bespoke the purpose of the luxurious place. It was profuse with every conceit to enamor him that came within its charms. He looked at the woman. She was a robust piece of pink humanity, beautiful to look upon, but Cyaxares was thinking of another. He was truly grieved in his fear for Madrilla's safety.

Drawing near to the young woman, who still lay panting in her comfortable swing, he was about to engage her in conversation when with a little, half-muffled scream of surprise she sprang from the hammock, ran to the small wicket in the lattice, through which they had entered, and closed and bolted it.

"Ah, I am to be your prisoner? What a charming keeper. Remove your veil, ere I die of curiosity to know if your face is as lovely as your person."

"Not on feast-day," she laughingly replied, as she pushed his hands away. "We must refresh ourselves," and she pulled the cord of a small silver bell. A servant appeared with service for three.

"What, are we to have our sweet seclusion intruded upon by a third person? I anticipated a pleasant

hour alone with my captor," exclaimed Cyaxares.

She did not reply, but anxiously watched the door through which the servant had disappeared. From time to time for several minutes she would run to this door and peer within, impatiently stamping her small, sandaled feet upon the rug.

The curtain was pushed back and a magnificent woman, of great beauty and dignity, appeared, a woman of an entirely different type from the voluptuous, half-nude creature that had captured him. She was dressed in full court costume of rose velvet, richly embroidered in gold, and rare jewels bedecked her stately head, neck, and shoulders. She was queenly in her grandeur.

Cyaxares paid her the tribute of recognizing a woman of courtly training by arising and making a profound and respectful bow, in doing which his short sword protruded and pushed aside his priest's garb, revealing his coat of mail.

To his utter astonishment the lady approached, extended her jeweled hand, and said:

"The distinguished Prince Cyaxares is most welcome to Baleria, even though he comes armed cap-a-pie to partake of our revels." The voice was musical and gentle, yet full of power, giving Cyaxares an unusual thrill.

"And may I ask the name of the fair and beautiful lady that addresses me thus?"

"Not yet. Fortunately to-day no one is required to reveal his identity, if he can successfully conceal it."

"Which evidently I have not done," said Cyaxares.

"For which we are grateful," she responded, looking at the younger woman. Her sweet laugh was wholesome and fascinating. If there was treachery in this

woman it surely was of a refined kind, thought Cyaxares, yet the evidence of some sort of intrigue was plain.

"We do strange things in Baleria," and she again laughed at the frankness with which the other displayed her charms in placing the oriental table for refreshments.

"I have asked my fair captor to remove her veil that I may see if her face is as fair as her person is lovely. May I ask this favor again?"

"I can assure you that it is one of the fairest faces in Baleria," answered the woman.

After a slight hesitation the dancer slowly unwound the scarf, and uncovered a truly beautiful face.

"Scala!" exclaimed Cyaxares.

Then, turning to the other, he asked, "And you?"

The conversation that he and Cracillies had overheard between Zinkara and the palace guards came to him with a rush. He knew that this was Salucia, but he dared not reveal that he knew aught of them.

"I am Salucia," she calmly replied.

"The consort of Deioces?" said Cyaxares.

"No, the accredited mistress of Deioces," she corrected, with a tinge of bitterness in her sweet voice.

"And a most beautiful woman," gallantly added Cyaxares.

"Do not flatter me, I am no longer lovely like this passionate creature, else I could win all the kings of the earth. I would go forth into the world naked, barefoot, and friendless, could I by so doing clothe my bones with this amorous flesh, and warm my heart with her hot young blood," and she caressed Scala.

"Say not so. You are beautiful, you have the rare dignity of a woman that has spent her youth well, and

knows that she has been loved for herself," exclaimed Cyaxares.

"Had I been loved for something else, I perhaps might have been queen of Ironia," she said sadly.

"But tell us, what brings Prince Cyaxares to Baleria in disguise, and fully accoutered?"

"To see your celebrated festivities, like thousands of others," replied Cyaxares.

"Is it fair to all the beautiful women of Baleria for you to conceal your handsome face and those beautiful curling locks beneath the uncouth cowl of a priest?"

She made no attempt to conceal her admiration.

"It is the fashion to-day," laughingly replied Cyaxares.

"But yesterday, and to-morrow?"

"Yesterday is passed, and to-morrow may never come for me, should Deioces learn, by any ill fortune, of my presence in Baleria," and Cyaxares looked earnestly into the deep, kindly eyes, and wondered if treachery could lurk beneath such pools of glory. But Baleria was satin-skinned.

Saluciea returned his gaze with a thoughtfulness that might have been a warning of either good or evil. Then she asked, cautiously,

"Who in Baleria could recognize you?"

"You have recognized me, yet we never saw each other before," replied Cyaxares.

"Ah, but that is different; Scala knew you; she has described you to me."

"How many Scalas might there be in Baleria? The wise fox does not knowingly walk into the trap when he sees it."

"Without being caught by good bait," retorted Saluciea, patting Scala's dimpled shoulder.

“Am I to consider myself caught?” asked Cyaxares.

“Or a wise fox, as you please. We are your friends,” she answered earnestly.

In an attempt to draw away from this dangerous subject, Cyaxares turned to Scala, and asked,

“And what stroke of good fortune made this charming woman your friend?”

“I have always been lucky,” evasively responded Scala.

“Is this your place of abode when visiting Baleria?”

“For to-day,” quickly answered Salucia, with a warning gesture to Scala, which Cyaxares did not lose.

“We came here to drown our troubles.”

“Women usually drown their troubles in tears,” said Cyaxares.

“And men theirs in wine,” responded Salucia.

“And when these fail they both drown themselves in the river. Ask Crecies,” said Scala.

“Who is Crecies?” asked Cyaxares.

“Don’t speak his detestable name, the wickedest man in Baleria,” exclaimed Salucia. “Why are we wasting good time in such gruesome conversation?”

“This is a charming little abode, I presume with many comforts, a restful place. Could it be secured for a longer period?” carefully inquired Cyaxares, permitting his eyes to roam over the suggestive trappings of the room, then rest suggestively upon the charms of Scala.

The ruse was not wasted. Salucia flushed hot as she glanced at Scala, then made reply.

“If your motive for coming here is not for some sinister purpose, it might be had indefinitely.” There was an eager wistfulness about this hesitating ac-

knowledge that touched Cyaxares. It seemed to tell a tragedy of a hungry heart, for this woman was no coquette. It intimated a serious desire to be friendly to him, but it could not reveal her ulterior motive. She was subtle where Scala was bold. Scala was not that type of woman; did she desire the love of a man she would throw her amorous arms about him, shower him with passionate caresses and tell him so, depending upon her ardent nature to subdue her prey. Saluceia would not enjoy a pleasure so lightly won, therefore the purr of the tigress was more pronounced in her methods, and her love could never be quenched did she love with the certainty of her affection's being reciprocated.

Cyaxares knew the danger of his position. He was big, handsome, and strong, and had conserved the rich young blood of youth, so attractive to ardent women. He had never loved a woman enough to want to call her his own, therefore he was susceptible to the gentle wiles of the fair sex from sheer animal freedom. He felt that youthful yearning for the wild and passionate affection that more often wrecks than conserves. The constant glow of youth in Scala was terribly fascinating to him, yet he felt the overpowering influence of the deeper and more subtle being. One might be a temporary toy, but the other a permanent joy. For a single moment his mind dwelt upon the sensations that had swept his virgin soul when he felt the pulsing form of Madrilla, as he had briefly held her in his arms. Oh, that surely was different from the wild abandon that he had felt within him as he had carried Scala from the streets. They could not possibly be the same sensations. One was the chaste sentiment of awakening love, the other the wild throbbing of animal pas-

sion. He had not forgotten the former, and it now influenced him in what he did. He would have to play with both these high-strung women, as much as he despised subterfuge, yet his situation was not of his own planning.

How much did Scala know concerning his ambitious designs against Deioces? And how much had she told to Saluciea? What were Saluciea's real sentiments toward Deioces? Could she honorably be won over to his cause? These were all vital questions at this moment, which could not be asked. He sat silent for a moment. It seemed the only logical way out of the trap into which he had fallen, and was worth trying. With a sigh he said:

"I could conceive of no greater joy than to come here secretly from time to time, and view the beauties of Baleria with—" He looked at the two women. He had placed himself in an awkward position; was it one or both?

The women saw the point; both turned scarlet and laughed. Scala relieved the situation by finishing his sentence,

"With Saluciea."

The table had been removed, Scala was standing, or half leaning, upon Saluciea. When she said this, Saluciea drew her down upon her lap, embraced and caressed her passionately, saying,

"You are a tempting woman, Scala, I shall always be jealous of you."

"I shall be jealous of you," had a world of significance to Cyaxares. It seemed to be the explanation. They had had a previous understanding, consequently he had been the subject of previous discussions between them. Why! Where! When! This might

have a vital bearing upon his whole future. Could it be possible that this whole adventure was a part of a plot? Even so, he was willing to wager the success of all his undertakings that these two ardent women were sincerely counterplotting for their own joy and pleasure, and, if he fell into their plans, they would be his friends, but well did he know the revenge that they would heap upon him, did they believe their amorous advances scorned by him. He decided to act quickly.

“Ladies, if I pledge you the word of an honorable gentlemen to return here by early nightfall, will you permit me to hasten now to my own quarters, and make some suitable and necessary changes in my attire, and inform my body-guard that I am safe, and, in the meantime, will you secretly secure this house for one month?” and he poured into Scala’s hands a large sum of money.

The two women were in a quandary. They believed, yet they were suspicious of a ruse to escape them. They knew that he was in Baleria for some deep, ulterior purpose, and there lurked within them a desire to be on the friendly side of this handsome young prince, who seemed so strong and resourceful, but they dared not broach this to him.

Should he not return, their opportunity would be lost. To the contrary, should he keep faith with them and return, it would probably be the greatest opportunity of their lives.

Scala was as full of intrigue as Saluciea was of ambition. She had listened to the plots and counterplots of political factions, while the politicians were under the influence of her father’s wine, till she was better posted on the trend of politics than most of the statesmen of the surrounding countries. As she grew older

and began to analyze these important matters she grew restless to be associated directly with the men themselves for the very excitement and passion of it. Paulius had known Scala, and had informed Saluciea of her wild, passionate nature. Saluciea needed just such a companion, and secretly had Scala brought to her, since which time they had been on the most intimate terms, constantly plotting for their own ambitious ends. There was no question regarding their loyalty to each other, first, last, and all the time. Scala had a better knowledge of men than of women, and she knew the needs of women equally as well as Saluciea, therefore she was of real value to a woman who had been as jealously guarded as had been Saluciea.

Here were three strong characters, two pitted against the other.

“Had I my strong Cambyses here, I would be more evenly matched with my fair enemies,” he said slyly, intending to note the effect upon Scala. But he had no time to prepare for what happened. She threw herself upon the bosom of Saluciea and began to weep.

Saluciea was truly surprised. Pushing Scala’s blushing and tear-stained face away from her, she looked inquiringly at Cyaxares, and asked,

“Who is Cambyses?”

“Yes, I love a man, I love Cambyses, but he does not love me,” wailed Scala.

“Who is Cambyses?” Saluciea again asked, looking suspiciously at Scala. Here was one secret that she had kept from her.

“As Scala is your bosom friend, Cambyses is my bosom friend,” explained Cyaxares.

“Is he here now?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Will you promise upon your most sacred honor to return here to-night, and bring Cambyses? I want to see what manner of man it is who loves not Scala when she thus declares a secret love for him,” she said, with an eagerness that much puzzled him. Could it be that this woman longed for such conquest herself?

Cyaxares was trapped; there might be some hidden menace in all this feminine intrigue. He was practically alone in this country of his worst enemy. It would go ill with him should he be ensnared with, or by, the ruling women of Deioces’ palace.

It was recognized as an unwritten law that death was the penalty for him that was caught trifling with the mistress of the king. But suppose that mistress herself, the ally of her lordly paramour, was bringing about this very situation, as the only safe way of having beheaded the only aspirant to Deioces’ throne. That was a question to puzzle a sage and make the bravest man quail. The probabilities were favorable to that very contingency.

His hesitation was apparent to Salucia. Her quick wit grasped the trend of his thoughts. Placing her hand upon his arm, she said in an almost beseeching voice:

“Believe me, I give you the word of one that values truth and love more highly than ambition that I will sacrifice my own life before I will jeopardize yours.”

Her earnestness greatly impressed Cyaxares. Raising her hands to his lips he kissed them, saying:

“I do believe you; I did not hesitate on my own account, Salucia; a man may speak for himself, and challenge fate, to enjoy the passion of a lovely woman, but he may not imperil another’s life with impunity.

It was for Cambyses that I hesitated to speak. Nevertheless, I promise to bring Cambyses here this night. We will come disguised as priests of Crail," and he looked out through the lattice work.

The streets were not so congested now. While the joyous mob had not wholly spent its fury, the whirling eddies of humanity were not so pronounced. The people had dispersed more widely over the city. Cyaxares knew that it was essential for him to get to the bridge. While, doubtless, his party would be safe in the gardens of Crail, Cambyses or the priests might decide to do something radical in searching for him.

Now drawing the two women close to him, he placed his great strong arms about them, saying:

"Two fairer or more beautiful women than you I have never seen. I wish I could know you under safer and better conditions. The vicissitudes of time may widely separate us, and change our conditions, but I believe that there is an underlying good in both of you well worth conserving. I pledge myself your friend at such times as I may be able best to serve you. I will go and return with Cambyses to-night."

Salucia clung to him as if reluctant to let him go. Tears were in her eyes as she looked into his proud face, and said:

"I will speak for both of us. We are not nearly so bad as you may think us. I will prove this to you by saying that for which my head may fall: I am not the mistress of Deioces and never have been, no matter what the world may say. I despise him above all men. More than this I must not tell you now. But, believe me, I am your friend. You will not betray me, I am sure."

Puzzled beyond expression, Cyaxares inquired of them the way to the bridge, and took his departure.

Almost the first person that he met upon gaining the street saluted him. It was Saranaces, who apparently had not quitted the vicinity from the time that he had seen Cyaxares ascend the steps with Scala in his arms. He simply said:

“Come, we must not linger here. I have seen suspicious eyes watching this place.”

Cyaxares made no attempt to explain, for it was too important a subject. Therefore he bided the time when he could tell the story in all its details. Cracillies had conducted the princesses on to the gardens of Crail, but Cambyses and his men were impatiently awaiting him at the bridge.

CHAPTER V

THE CAVERNS OF CRAIL

ARRIVING at the grotto, which was supposed to be the entrance of the caverns of Crail, Saranaces was sponsor for Cyaxares and his party as Cracillies had been for the princesses.

Instead, however, of their entering into the darkness of a cavern, after traversing a long, narrow gorge, with walls so close together that they at times shut out the light of day, they entered into a magnificent, park-like garden, filled with all that could delight the eye. Long avenues of semi-tropical trees, well protected within these high walls, thrived as if native along the multitude of winding, flower-bedecked paths. Sparkling streams irrigated this fairy garden, which produced in greatest abundance the fruits and vegetable foods for the two hundred priests of Crail.

The sides of the mountain were covered with vineyards, and this retreat was celebrated for delicious wines. Deioces was occasionally favored with limited portions of rare vintages.

These gardens rivaled in beauty the parks about Deioces' palace. The sparkling waters came from the mountain springs at the base of the cliffs, and had been carefully conducted to all parts of the garden by a system of irrigating conduits.

Rare trees, shrubs, and flowers were everywhere.

Cyaxares viewed this with unmixed pleasure, for he not only desired to leave Almareta and Madrilla under the protection of Cracillies until he could lay his politi-

cal lines, but he had a wholesome fear of attempting to take them out of Ironia after he had observed the duplicity of Deioeces. This magnificent garden intimated a comfortable environment during their stay there. He had been worried not a little regarding their welfare here during his absence. His mind was so concentrated upon the one theme, that of recovering "Little Paradise," that he had not allowed himself to think about the possibilities of choosing a consort to help him share his glories, should his plans prosper. His opportunity of comparing the two young princesses had been too limited for him to have any definite ideas regarding their beauty, or their fitness to be his consort. Enshrouded as they were in disguising clothes, he had had no opportunity of choosing between them. Neither had ever been celebrated in song or poetry for her charms. He only knew that strange thrill that had come to him when he had taken Madrilla in his arms. Almaretta might have caused the same. It was true, however, that neither Scala nor Salucia had given him the same thrill, and this puzzled him, for they were both beautiful.

It was explained to him that two hundred priests resided in the caverns of Crail. Twenty sisters resided in, and presided over, the gardens. These also administer to the wants of the sick of the colony. These females were quite aged.

The caverns had but one direct connection with these gardens. In early morn, and at sunset, the priests could be seen promenading along a high gallery above the gardens, usually arm in arm. They seldom were seen in the gardens below, and then only in the company of Cracillies or Saranaces.

Cyaxares at once asked to see Cracillies. That

good old priest took him to a large and comfortable villa, or rather to a series of villas, occupied by the sisters of Crail. To these Almaretta and Madrilla had been consigned, and had had time to don the comfortable garb of the inmates.

Cracillies and Cyaxares were permitted to have free conversation with the two princesses, and the prince for the first time had the pleasure of seeing these young women in a dress to reveal their perfection. Simple as were these garbs, the princesses were beautiful; both were beautiful. Cyaxares wondered how he had been so deceived by Scala and Saluciea. He was at once enamored of Madrilla. Her thick brown tresses, her soft blue eyes, her velvet cheeks, and voluptuous person, all appealed to his strength and brawn. Almaretta was Semitic in her severe, dark beauty. She was not of the same type. Moreover, she, too, yielded to Madrilla in everything, yet they were inseparable friends. Cyaxares was frank to show that he was the more strongly drawn toward Madrilla, which fact seemed greatly to please Almaretta.

Cracillies was the head of the priests of Crail, therefore when he assumed to be sponsor for the conduct of these strange young people, it was sufficient; and while they conversed upon the topics most to their interest they also walked about, and viewed, the beautiful gardens.

Cracillies accompanied Almaretta, while Cyaxares and Madrilla walked together.

“How am I to reward you for your brave and generous rescue of us from a situation that I knew was fraught with such grave dangers, when we do not even know what your motive is?” and Madrilla looked anxiously up into Cyaxares’ face. His head was bare,

and as his mass of brown hair tumbled about his neck and shoulders he was truly handsome. Madrilla did not attempt to conceal her confidence in him. Her admiration was palpable. She was as much pleased with him as he was with her.

Smiling down upon her, he said:

"I am Cyaxares, son of Phraortes. The reward that I claim for having been instrumental in saving you from a nameless fate is paid in the joy that I have in knowing you. The future may hold a still greater joy for me, when I have earned it," was the gallant reply.

"You have earned my eternal gratitude, whatever the future may hold," said Madrilla.

"You are safe, but not yet free to leave Ironia. But I pledge my life upon your being returned in safety to your country. I start to-morrow morning to secure absolute protection for you while leaving this dangerous land, dangerous as long as Deioces is king over it," said Cyaxares, earnestly.

"I would gladly share your dangers by going with you now," she said.

"I would be overjoyed to have you do so, but there are other things to be considered. You are secure here. I shall come here for you when the way is clear," and his eyes told more than his words.

"And how long shall I have to wait?" she plaintively asked.

"Not one moment longer than it will require me to remove all obstacles, and return here for you."

"And then?"

"I know not."

A long silence ensued, broken by Cyaxares.

"You are the daughter of the great and mysterious

Sapor, King of Kings. I am the son of a throneless king. We may never meet again after I have taken you to permanent safety," he said, sadly. They had paused in their walk.

"Do you believe you would wish to see me again? Our acquaintance has been brief."

"It is sufficient; I wish to see you again, and I will earn the right."

"When you place me in the safe environs of the Holy Crater, you will have earned the right. I pledge you my word that you shall see me again, and often. Almaretta has told me who you are. I will give you a sealed message to the Sapor. You shall be king of Ironia. The good priest Cracillies will hand you my message. I wish you safety and good health during your hard journey, and I shall pray each day for your early return."

They were at the entrance through which Almaretta had already passed. Cracillies was some distance away, calmly examining some flowers. Cyaxares raised the two plump hands to his lips, kissed them, and whispered, "Till then."

"Till then," she softly repeated after him, and there was a fathomless depth of love in the great blue eyes that looked into his own — something that he had never seen before.

He could not help it; it said itself, as she turned for one final glance,

"Your love shall be my highest goal!"

"Till then," she responded, wafting him a kiss with her beautiful hands.

Slowly he went toward Cracillies. The priest looked sharply at the flushed face. Perceiving the close scrutiny of the elder man, and knowing its mean-

ing, Cyaxares blushed to even a deeper glow. The priest placed his hand within the prince's arm, and said:

"A good beginning, I pray it may lead to better things, but, Cyaxares, you have the greatest trials and hardships before you. We must prevent a holy war, if possible, yet have the aid of the Holy Crater. This will require a diplomacy that would tax the ingenuity and patience of much older and more experienced statesmen than yourself. I would suggest your at once attempting to take these princesses to their respective homes, but I have the positive evidence that you cannot do this with any degree of safety. There is deeper intrigue abroad than we at first thought. It was by some means discovered that you were in Baleria, a deep laid plot was in operation to capture you, and while I must for the present refrain from actually charging him with it, I am convinced that Saranaces has some knowledge of it, and is forming some counterplot of his own. Only your coming here saved you. You must prepare for immediate departure from here."

They had stopped. Cyaxares was staring into the priest's face.

"Do you know what occurred to me when we were separated in Baleria?" he asked.

"How could I? I came directly here with the ladies."

Cyaxares hastily told the facts. Cracillies was more than surprised, saying:

"Cyaxares, if you were as homely as Paulius you would now be languishing in a cell. Your escape is a miracle."

"But, Cracillies, I have given my word of honor to

return there to-night, and to take Cambyses with me," exclaimed Cyaxares.

The priest threw up his hands.

"You will not keep this suicidal engagement? If you do you will never leave Baleria alive."

"Yet I have pledged my honor, and must go," replied Cyaxares.

"This is foolish. These women have enamored you, and this is a rendezvous for love. I am impatient with you. O youth, you become irrational under the eyes of women. But a moment ago you pledged eternal love to Madrilla, and now you seek to debase yourself, believing that you may vent your passion in the arms of these plotting women."

Cyaxares was surprised.

"How did you know that I mentioned love to Madrilla?"

"I saw it in your face. It mattered not whether you spoke it. She is a woman, she saw it. I approve of it, I am overjoyed to know it. But this is a sad betrayal of her confidence, something you cannot purchase with gold."

Cyaxares hung his head. Cracillies' criticism was just from his beliefs. Looking the priest frankly in the face, he said:

"Cracillies, I know you are truly my friend. From your point of view, what you have said is justifiable. But I am going to convince you that I have a different motive in going back to Baleria to-night. But first I want to ask if you have positive evidence that Scala and Saluciea are the characters that you charge them with being?"

Cracillies seemed much confused at this question, hesitating painfully as he said:

“Why, why, you have just told me that Scala, half-nude, enticed you into her rendezvous.”

“Is that your only evidence?”

“I prefer not to discuss the matter,” doggedly replied Cracillies.

“Suppose she had enticed me into the house for a purpose entirely different from that that you intimate? She was not in the street when my cowl was torn off my head. I saw her dart directly to me from the veranda. Salucia herself confessed that she and Scala had previously had me under discussion.”

Cracillies was deeply interested.

“Now,” continued Cyaxares, “before you think of this, what about the chastity of Salucia?”

“Chastity! Why, you know the whole world believes Salucia to be the mistress of Deioces,” and Cracillies looked startled.

“Could a woman be mistress to a king and remain virtuous?” asked Cyaxares.

“Not in the common use of the term, but there must be some strange thing in your mind. What is it?” said Cracillies.

“It is this, my best friend, I am going to keep my pledge and return to these women to-night and prove that even women that are openly accused of evil things have as much honor as men when put to the final test, and now I am going to prove to you that very often women are accused of being much worse than they really are. I have the word of Salucia that she is not the mistress of Deioces, and never was, and I believe her. I am going to make her my friend and ally. As for Scala, it is not so important a matter, but Salucia tries to shield her from the intimation that she is immoral. Nevertheless, when a woman has will-

ingly thrown her nude self into a man's arms, it is difficult to overcome the belief that she would go to greater extremes if need be, but she is wholly devoted to Salucia, and will blindly do her bidding."

"You are taking desperate chances, Cyaxares. There are many things that I could tell you regarding Salucia, but not now. I cannot advise you further on this point."

"The time is growing short. I will ask if you will hold in safety Scala and Salucia, should I bring them here to-night?"

"You bring Scala and Salucia here!" exclaimed Cracillies in an amazed tone.

"For safe keeping," said Cyaxares.

"The perfidy of men, and yet we condemn women for lesser crimes. I take it that you mean to bring these women here by some ruse and then detain them, after their having thrown themselves into your arms. Even though they may be virtuous women, they, by giving you their confidence, seek your love. They are enamored of you, and are willing perhaps to betray Deioeces to you. But do you think they expect no reward? And this treachery is to be their reward. You are treating them as lewd women by tempting them, Cyaxares. Is this your method of pledging your honor to helpless women?"

"Ah, my dear Cracillies, you jump at conclusions. I am going to make these women my allies. They are at the most desperate period in their lives; I am going to save them from themselves. They must be removed from our sphere of action because they are fascinating women, who, should they become identified with the plotting that is just now brooding in Baleria, could give us more trouble than a dozen Erskaleses. They

have placed themselves in this awkward position. It is no purposeful breach of honor for me to checkmate them, and safely tuck them out of the way until we can again set them free, under better conditions for all concerned. Show me where they will have lost anything."

"Your argument is not without merit, Cyaxares, but I have never favored the bartering in the human passions that belong to love and affection. I believe these to be the most sacred things in natural religion. On the ground that I believe these women are deliberately plotting to betray you, I will be prepared to receive them should you bring them here to-night. It should not be a difficult matter to persuade them to come to the world-famous gardens of Crail. But, Cyaxares, do not promise your love to either of these women. Doubtless Saranaces is wondering where we are; I deem it wise to conceal from him, if it is possible, the fact that you contemplate bringing the women here. If he and they are plotting to betray you, this will be an embarrassing interruption to their plans."

"It is impossible that he should know that I contemplate going there to-night, for he could not guess what arrangements I had made with the women. I saw him as I came out of the house, and he could not have received word from them. I only told him a part of what occurred there. We must detain him here in order to prevent his communicating with them. The whole matter looks suspiciously like collusion between Saranaces and Saluciea."

"We must do more than this, we must at the earliest hour bring our prisoners here where we can better guard them. We cannot do this, though, without Saranaces' knowledge. I have a suspicion of Sara-

naces' motives, and he will be as interested as we in keeping secret their presence here," said Cracillies.

"Oh, here come Saranaces and Cambyses now. Let us be discussing philosophy, for Saranaces is a man of quick perception."

As the two came to where they had seated themselves, Cracillies exclaimed to Cyaxares:

"Destiny is arbitrary, fate is impartial. At one moment fate may appear to be our best friend and in the next moment our worst enemy; but, in the end, the balance is in favor of right, and what destiny designs, that is right. Truth and justice must prevail, because they are conserving elements in all things celestial and terrestrial."

"Then you believe my cause to be just, and events trending toward that just balance?" said Cyaxares, motioning Cambyses and Saranaces to be seated.

"Certainly, else I would not advocate your cause; but a hair thrown into the scale may clog justice, and change that trend."

"Then fate is not arbitrary if we may change it, even by accident," declared Cyaxares.

"I did not say that fate is arbitrary. I said destiny is arbitrary. The destiny of the waters that flow down from these mountains is the sea. Fate may hasten or retard their flow, but they will overcome fate and finally reach their arbitrary destination. So, you see, fate and destiny are not identical."

"Then we are at the mercy of blind fate."

"Yes, destiny is wide-eyed, but fate is blind. With knowledge and understanding we may evade the whim of fate, but we may never escape destiny, which is finality, the nearest approach to absolute rest. Gravity is the agent of destiny; all the forces opposed to

gravity are the agents of fate. The line of destiny is straight; the line of fate is eccentric."

"Destiny, then, arbitrarily trends toward rest, or balance, and fate interposes or removes obstructions, therefore may work in favor of destiny or against it?" said Cyaxares.

"Yes, therefore one buffeted by fate may draw so far away from the influence of destiny as guiding the whole that the balance falls short of the object of his desires, that object having better exercised justice against him in the economy of the whole, and he is by fate eliminated from the calculations to reach his final destination through some other channel. Destiny deals with the whole mass, and balance is justice. Fate deals with the separate elements, and all things seek the line of least resistance to a level or balance, rest, peace. There is no such thing as absolute rest, else the universe would crystallize, and life would cease. Fate does not always seem just, from a selfish point of view, but destiny is arbitrarily just, because it tends to balance."

"Then you believe that by understanding and foreknowledge one may master fate, but we cannot alter the finality of destiny," exclaimed Cyaxares.

"You are, in ignorance, the blind instrument of fate. By understanding you may meet and master fate, and hasten your own destiny. Fate placed the retarding stone in the way of the waters, hindering their trend toward the sea. Understanding removes the stone, and hastens the waters on to their destination. Do not make the mistake of believing that by mastering fate you may shape your own final destiny. You may reach a goal fixed by your own finite mind, but destiny is infinite, therefore inscrutable. Under-

standing is limited to our capacity to record and to compare experiences. That capacity cannot reach into the universal mind to its finality, and know all things, else man could embarrass and obstruct creation. It is inconceivable that a single cell may know as much as the whole body of which it is but an infinitesimal part."

"You speak of creation as a purposeful, reasoning individuality," said Cyaxares in surprise.

"Why do you deny to the whole of creation powers that you attribute to its smallest parts, the power to reason? As I have said, the single cell cannot be wiser than the body that produces and nourishes it. When the parent body gives to the newly developed cell the sense of self-protection and development, does it wholly surrender this same sense itself? There is a reasoning, thinking, all-knowing, universal mind pervading the whole universe. To the extent of our limited knowledge we have drawn from this parent mind nourishment for our own, and, by constant effort, we may attain to greater things."

"You are getting beyond my capacity to understand you," cried Cyaxares, throwing up his hands.

"Well, then," laughingly said Cracillies, "tell us all about your adventure in Baleria. We were much alarmed when both you and Saranaces so suddenly disappeared, fearing that some spy of Deioces' might have recognized you."

"I have told Saranaces of my strange experience, and it will bear repeating to you and Cambyses," said Cyaxares.

"When you hear the truth you will have much to disconcert you, for mine was too well staged to be named an accidental adventure. I consider my escape

a miracle. One of those freaks of fate that we cannot foresee." Then he related such of the facts as he thought wise to reveal.

"And their identity?" asked Cracillies, in apparent excitement.

Cyaxares dramatically hesitated for a moment, then said,

"The nude woman that I picked up in my arms in the street was Scala."

"Scala!" exclaimed Cambyses, and his look of amazement deepened into a scowl.

"And the other?"

"Saluciea."

They all exclaimed in surprise at this revelation. Cambyses was almost overcome with an excitement that the others did not understand.

Suddenly arising, he clinched his fists, took a step toward Cyaxares, and, in a voice choking with rage, said,

"Cyaxares, we are betrayed."

A startled look came into the face of Saranaces. Both Cyaxares and Cracillies took careful note of it.

Fearful of betraying himself to these astute men, Saranaces remarked that while they were discussing the matter he would go and take some greatly needed rest. When Saranaces had disappeared, Cracillies arose and pointed toward a cross, erected of loose stones, and standing out against the sky. Not a word was spoken but as they looked four figures appeared before the cross. Cracillies raised his hands and brought them around in a circle to a level with his face. The figures disappeared.

To Cyaxares' inquiring look he said:

"My faithful Trincules, head guardsman to the

grotto by which we entered the gardens; Helluses, head guardsman of the entrance leading from the gardens to the caverns; Nicoles, head guardsman to the entrance to the labyrinth, and Poco, head guardsman to a secret outer entrance from the mountains. In anticipation of just what has occurred I have closed all these entrances against Saranaces."

"A wise precaution," said Cyaxares, "for, should there be a conspiracy, Saranaces must necessarily seek Salucia at once to know what to do next."

Cambyses was taking something to heart. He was pacing back and forth like an enraged tiger. Stopping, he heaved a great sigh, and said:

"Cyaxares, I insist that we have been betrayed. We are prisoners in the caverns of Crail."

"How dare you?" exclaimed Cracillies. "Were you other than Cambyses, I would quickly convince you of your error."

"Cambyses, you are beside yourself. You must not thus offend our best friend, Cracillies. We shall leave here on the morrow with more than his blessing," said Cyaxares, placing his hand upon Cambyses' arm.

"Forgive me, Cracillies, I spoke hastily and without due reason," returned Cambyses.

"You are quickly forgiven, Cambyses, for I know you to be a man of hasty temper," said Cracillies. "But now let us analyze this singular coincidence of Scala and Salucia."

"It is they who have betrayed us," said Cambyses.

"I will stake my life upon our having placed ourselves in a position to knock all props from under Deioces," declared Cyaxares.

"Go on," said Cambyses.

"This night we will learn everything about this

plot, if there be one. These ladies are seeking associates more of their own liking."

Cyaxares was checked by Cambyses' having suddenly raised his mace as though to strike him. Cracillies threw himself between them. Cyaxares was calm and unmoved.

"Do you mean to say that Scala is a street strumpet?" Cambyses savagely bellowed.

"Not of my making," coolly replied Cyaxares.

"Of any one's making?" demanded the enraged soldier.

Looking calmly at Cambyses as if calculating how best to bring a madman to his senses, Cyaxares said:

"Cambyses, the facts are so plain that I would not make reply to you, were it not for the love that I bear you, and the knowledge that I have of your real affection and high regard for Scala, which blinds you to reason. You must know that I am not responsible for the conduct of the woman that you love. As painful as it is, it should be a satisfaction for you to know the true character of the woman. Whether she is chaste or not I do not know, but I do know that as my lord chancellor I would not approve of your marrying a woman that would dance nude in the streets and place herself on a par with that class of women, even if her face was concealed. It is no crime against God to love in secret, but it is a deadly contrast brazenly to throw oneself into willing arms in the public thoroughfare. I do not know now that this is their secret rendezvous for pleasure, but it was used to entice me, and the methods were those of lewd women, swearing me to return there and bring you this night. Whether this be a plot or a love adventure, I pledge you all that I hope to gain by our movement against

Deioces that these two women will not betray us. My object is to make them our permanent allies. Had I spurned them, I would never have reached the bridge alive. That is the whole matter. Do as you like, I bear you no ill-will."

Cambyses stood shamefaced before them.

"Forgive me, Cyaxares, I was so shocked at learning of Scala's duplicity that I was beside myself with disappointment and rage. I would tear out my own heart before I would lose your love and respect. But what would you have me do?"

"Go willingly with me to-night, and play your part well. You may be your own judge of Scala's character, but, from what you and she have both said to me, you have no right to judge her. So far as you are concerned, Scala is a free agent, to do as she pleases," and he gently placed his hand upon Cambyses' shoulder.

"Yes, that is the truth," admitted Cambyses.

The subject grew less disagreeable as they went deeper into it.

Continuing, Cyaxares said:

"There is much more in this than disappointed love. A woman, as a rule, is as cruel to a discarded lover as she is kind to a newly found one. We must assume that Saluciea, sent to plot our downfall, is willing to exchange Deioces for a new lover. Believing that she may make an impression upon me, she is willing to betray Deioces, and is ready to confess the whole duplicity. She has Scala, her bosom companion, join her to give her courage. This night she will confess the plot. But, Cambyses, it compels us to play a mean rôle. . . . I deem it well, Cracillies, to inform Cambyses of the conversation that we overheard between Zinkara and the guards," and, at a nod of ap-

proval from Cracillies, he repeated what they had heard.

“And to spare my feelings you did not tell me,” said Cambyses.

“I did not feel justified in condemning Scala on such evidence, and in turning you against her,” replied Cyaxares.

“I have been thinking deeply,” broke in Cracillies. “It is impossible for you to make these women your allies. Their demand upon you for reward would be a scandal before the whole world. Whether they are chaste women or not, the world believes them to be bad. The Church would resent such an alliance. You probably have, by a remarkable stroke of fortune, put a snarl in the plans of Saranaces, for I believe him to be the arch-plotter against you. I do not attribute the actions of the women to Deioces’ will.”

“Cracillies, you are ungenerous. I am not enamored of these women. I believe a little gentle restraint will do them good. This is a game of wit cut wit. Should they be in a plot against us, it is most important that they be detained. They could not well be brought here by force. Moreover, I believe that they will come by persuasion. Here they may be made equally as comfortable, and certainly no less virtuous. Their sudden disappearance will add to the confusion of Deioces, who is, doubtless, half-crazed that he cannot solve the mystery of these disappearances. He will be afraid of his own shadow.”

“How do you propose to induce them to accompany you?” asked Cracillies.

“Saranaces has doubtless described to them the wonders of these gardens. They are wild to view them. It would be a great lark for these spirited

women to don priests' garbs and come here, under the guidance of Cambyses and myself," earnestly argued Cyaxares.

Cracillies smiled.

"Do you believe that this is all child's prattle?" demanded Cyaxares, with asperity.

"No, I was laughing at the thought that poor Erskales would get the credit for Saluciea's disappearance. He has twice been reprimanded for paying too much attention to Saluciea. Deioces has practically withdrawn his confidence from Erskales. There is no one else upon whom he can cast suspicion."

"Then this becomes the solution of the whole question. With all those in whom he usually confides mysteriously taken away from him, he will at once fly into a panic, and call his army about him as his only safeguard. I will give him early cause to put that army into active service," said Cyaxares.

"Well, perhaps Cambyses would feel better did he know that Scala was provided for here instead of being permitted to prowl freely about the streets of wicked Baleria. I am inclined to let you have your way," said Cracillies.

"I would rather she were dead and in her tomb than alive and plying her trade in that hell's graveyard," growled Cambyses.

"Not quite so bad as that, while she is under the protection of Saluciea," smiled Cracillies.

"I have a revelation," declared Cyaxares. "Listen carefully. Saranaces is the only one that can spoil our plans. He must be detained here. If we succeed to-night in bringing here Saluciea and Scala, our work here is completed. To-morrow Cambyses and I will start for Persis, where I will make proper repre-

sentations to Astyages, then I shall go alone to the Holy Crater, bearing despatches from Astyages and from you, Cracillies. As soon as we are gone, the word must go to Deioces that Astyages has not only carried away the two princesses, but has also taken all these missing officials, also Saluciea and Scala, to hold as hostages until Deioces has made proper amends for his terrible insult to the other rulers. I informed Deioces that Astyages' army was waiting to have his reply to the message that I delivered to him as coming from Astyages.

"Deioces has a standing army of thirty thousand well-equipped soldiers. In his confusion and anger he will recklessly throw these soldiers out through the passes, and I hope to be prepared to slip an army in behind him, cut off his base of supplies, and block his return into little Ironia. His army will be annihilated."

"Carry this plan to a successful conclusion, and the moment you give me the word I will have a howling revolution on hand here. We have arms and accouterments hidden here for two thousand men," excitedly declared Cracillies. "Now go quickly, and prepare yourselves. It will be dark by the time you can reach the city. I will personally pass you in upon your return here."

"But Saranaces?" anxiously suggested Cyaxares.

"I will see to that," said Cracillies as he left them.

Cyaxares and Cambyses hastened away to prepare for their rendezvous with the two charming ladies.

"Play your part well, Cambyses. You may never again have an equal opportunity to make love to Scala."

"I will do my part, Cyaxares, never fear."

CHAPTER VI

THE TRAGEDY AT THE HOUSE IN BALERIA

AT the suggestion of Cracillies, Cyaxares and Cambyses were placed in the hands of Poco and were conducted through a secret passageway, the distance being so great that Cyaxares remarked upon the time that it required to reach the outer entrance. Great was their astonishment when a door opened, and they found themselves in the rendezvous in Baleria where they had first met Cracillies. There were several priests in the room and five other muffled figures. The prisoners were being secretly conveyed to the caverns of Crail. Paulius and Crecies had just been brought in, and the procession was ready to enter the secret underground passage. Poco, instructing Cyaxares to return to the gardens by way of the bridge, let them out upon the street. They experienced no difficulty in returning to the house, where they were warmly greeted.

Scala very promptly threw her plump arms about Cambyses, and without invitation began to shower him with caresses, all to his liking.

Salucia was more dignified and discreet in her greeting of Cyaxares, nevertheless she permitted him to take some liberties. She seemed sincerely pleased, however, that Cyaxares had kept his tryst.

“I love a man that keeps his promise,” she said, as they entered a comfortable room in a secluded part of the house, where they were served with a delicious

repast. Delicacies and wines, such as they had never tasted before, were there.

Cyaxares and Cambyses had both laid off their mail for the courtly dress of gentlemen. Upon the removal of their disguising cassocks the ladies had exclaimed at the marked improvement in their appearance.

“You are, indeed, a prince,” exclaimed Saluciea.

“And you a splendid man,” exclaimed Scala, and she again assaulted Cambyses with her passionate caresses. She was digging her own grave, but she was having a good time with the undertaker, and he resented it less as the wine took effect.

Arising, Cyaxares drew Saluciea up to him, raised his glass aloft, and said to Cambyses,

“Let us drink to the fair ladies,” then turning to his blushing companion, he continued: “We have this night paid to you ladies the highest compliment that men can pay to women. We are in a strange land, surrounded by enemies, and with intrigue upon our trail; we have risked our lives to come here and drink your wine and partake of your viands that we might pay you the compliment of confidence. There can be no love without confidence.”

Saluciea looked appealingly into his face for a moment, then, as her face went chalky white, she slipped to her seat and buried her face in her arms, and she was convulsed by a wave of strong emotion. The others stood silent and with bowed heads. Well did Cyaxares know what was about to happen, but it occurred before he was fully prepared. Suddenly springing to her feet, Saluciea flung herself passionately into his arms, her cheeks flushed, her eyes aglow, and her whole person in a wild quiver of excitement.

“Yes, I will tell you!” she exclaimed. “You were marked for betrayal and we were your enemies, but you have won us over.”

Cyaxares half pushed her away, and looked surprised.

“Listen to me first. Condemn us afterward, if you must,” and she clung to him.

“I know my actions are unwomanly. Oh, what of that? Men do not believe women anyhow, nevertheless I am not so bad as the world makes me, and I am not bad enough to permit even a brother to barter my chastity for his political purposes. The world says that I am the mistress of Deioces; I have said the same to you; I have for twelve years endured the insult. I have sacrificed the best part of my life, love, ambition, everything, to appease the insatiable ambitions of an ungodly brother. I was consigned to Deioces at the age of eighteen, but never once has his polluting hands touched my person, and never shall they. Perhaps, at some more opportune time, I may give you a sufficient reason why he has not the power to despoil me. I tell you this to make you believe me, Cyaxares, for you have conquered me. I pledge you my life that by no fault of mine will you suffer while in Baleria. You are not safe here for one moment. My wicked and ambitious brother is waiting somewhere now secretly to capture you. He will take you to the king.”

“This brother of yours, who is he?” demanded Cyaxares.

“Saranaces,” she almost whispered.

Scala was almost overcome with the excitement, and had dropped into her seat. Cyaxares and Cambyses stood looking at each other.

“Does the king know that I am in Baleria?” asked Cyaxares.

“No, he has not yet been informed,” replied Saluciea. “My brother expects to stage this announcement to the best advantage for himself.”

“Saluciea, tell me the truth; for what purpose are you and Scala occupying this house?”

“For the sole purpose of ensnaring you. The first time that we ever entered it was on the morning of the fête-day. The house is a secret place for Saranaces’ plotting.”

Cyaxares drew a deep breath, then placing his hand upon Saluciea’s shoulder half caressingly, he said,

“Saluciea, do you know why your brother desired me to be taken in your company?”

“I have always done his bidding without asking his reasons,” she said, with perfect innocence in her questioning eyes.

“Then let me tell you the reason. Deioces would be wiped out of existence did he behead me, the only legitimate aspirant to his throne, for any other reason than betrayal of his household. Should he be able to prove by Saranaces that I had been discovered here in the company of his world-known mistress, the sword would fall upon my neck unchallenged.”

“What! Then he is sacrificing us both!” exclaimed Saluciea, clenching her hands in suppressed excitement and indignation; then a terror crept into her eyes, as she realized that it was too late, believing that they were entrapped together, that she had unwittingly betrayed her bosom friend and herself in serving her brother. Placing her hands upon her bosom, she raised her eyes, and softly said:

“I have done a great wrong, my life alone can

atone for it. It might as well be now as to wait in terror and sorrow to see the cruel end," and, before a staying hand could prevent it, she had broken the top off a pendant at the end of her chatelaine, and had swallowed its contents.

Horrified at the tragedy that had so suddenly occurred, they stood as if paralyzed. Cyaxares quickly placed her upon a couch and knelt beside her, chafing her hands and pleading with her to speak. The deadly poison was doing its work quickly. Her eyes opened for a single moment. She placed her hands upon Cyaxares' head.

"I must say it, I never before knew what love was; I love you. I can never be anything to you, and I cannot live to know of your suffering because of my perfidy. Forgive me; and Scala, she was but my tool. I vouch for her chastity, Cambyses, she loves you dearly. Good-bye, Scala, my love," and her beautiful head lay still against Cyaxares' shoulder.

For many minutes they all sat in a stupor. Fearful of a demonstration on the part of Scala, Cambyses held her tightly. It was not necessary, for the poor, frightened girl was incapable of understanding the meaning of it all, and in sheer terror had slid down to the floor in a dead faint. Cyaxares was so overcome that he quickly placed the splendid form upon the couch, folded her hands across the snowy bosom, then leaned upon Cambyses, and wept bitter tears of anguish and real sorrow.

Raising his hands high above his head, Cambyses exclaimed:

"I pray to all the gods in heaven to give to Saranaces and to Deioces, each, a thousand lives that I may take them all in avenging this crime!" Cyax-

ares only grasped the great hand as a token of approval.

"We are confronted by a new calamity, Cambyses. What are we to do with them?" and he looked at the women.

This question brought them to a realization that they must revive Scala, who was still in a swoon, and this they proceeded to do, taking care that she did not again look upon Salucia's calm, white face by carrying her into an adjoining room.

"We must act quickly, Cyaxares. Death would truly be our portion, should we be found here. Here are cassocks of the holy state, we are less liable to be recognized in these. This must be some of Saranaces' collection. Scala must also don this garb and go with us."

"What are you going to do?" asked Cyaxares.

"We must at once return to the caverns of Crail," said Cambyses.

"And leave Salucia here alone?" exclaimed Cyaxares. "That is too cruel."

"We cannot take the body with us. We must consult with Cracillies quickly, for this is more than a tragedy. It must not be discovered that Salucia, the king's mistress, is lying dead in a house away from the palace," declared Cambyses.

"She shall have a tomb of rarest onyx when I am king. She must be taken to the caves of Crail. You are right, Cambyses. I will cover the body. You make some reasonable excuse to Scala, and get her out of the house," then he passed into the death-chamber.

The small silver lamps were burning low. The chamber was so quiet that it seemed like a desecration to move. There she lay, like a grand piece of marble

statuary. Her face was placid as though no pain had accompanied death. This cold serenity greatly enhanced her beauty. Cyaxares stood gazing for a moment upon the calm, peaceful features, then the scalding tears that he could not hold back came in a grateful shower. Kneeling, he pressed the cold hands, saying:

“O, Saluciea, why did you do this? I believed you, yes, I know you were not the woman that the world had painted you. My soul knew that your great heart was true, and that you were a good woman. Only cruel fate had ensnared you. Had you but waited, O had you but waited! I could have loved a woman like you.” Suddenly he ceased speaking, and a look of terror came into his face. What was that? Had her soul not yet left her body? Had it responded to his appeal? Two great tears had suddenly appeared upon the long lashes, and now they clung there; now they were released, and like dropping pearls fell down over the snowy cheeks.

“Cambyses!” he whispered, “Cambyses!” But no answer came.

“Cambyses! Look! she is not dead, she weeps!” and he looked into the other room; they had gone.

Again he felt the cold hands. The face was also cold. Rigidity had quickly stiffened the whole body. Yes, she was dead. Sadly he covered the beautiful form, went through the door, locking it after him, and hurried on to overtake Cambyses and Scala, who had traveled quickly, and were now near the bridge. The three passed on, silent and sick at heart.

As they passed over the bridge a single priest stepped out of the shadow and looked at them for a moment. He, too, wore the garb of the Holy State;

suddenly he whirled about and walked briskly after them, and saw them disappear inside the grotto leading into the gardens of Crail. Standing for a moment as if astonished, he muttered:

“What, vestrymen of the Holy State entering the gardens of Crail, when I am not permitted to do so? Why, Deioces himself has no such privilege.” Then, as if in deep anger at such a discovery, he rushed to the entrance of the grotto, and shouted,

“What! Ho, there!”

Only the reverberation of his own voice answered him.

“I will enter unbidden then,” and he boldly entered into the grotto.

“Who comes there?” was a sudden challenge from the very wall itself.

“I am Erskales. I demand to know why my priests are permitted to enter here unchallenged while I myself — aye, even Deioces himself has not this privilege?”

“Hasten then and overtake them, and ask of them the meaning of it,” replied the voice.

Erskales took but a few steps, when a cloak was cast over his head, and he felt himself lifted up as if being taken up into a higher passageway. It was useless to struggle. It gave him more relief to pray. He was a prisoner in the labyrinth of Crail, and not a living soul but him and his captors knew it. He acknowledged after it was too late that he was a fool.

There were four men in this upper gallery; two of them carried the prisoner forward, while the other two followed.

“Trincules, even the devil sometimes meets a stroke of good fortune. Now you can apply this to one or

both of us, for I have by a stroke of fortune made myself head of the Holy State, which means a high promotion for you. This is Erskales himself who has thrust his august person into the well-hole. We must not permit your two assistants to recognize him. I charge you alone with his safe keeping. Take him to the well-hole. Did you again close the cleft?"

"It is closed," said Trincules.

They hastened along the gallery in the flickering light of flambeaux until they reached a curious excavation, through the top of which could be discerned the blue sky and twinkling stars.

Depositing Erskales, they placed about his body a steel hoop to which a long chain was attached, the other end of which was fastened to the wall of the cavern. Bidding the other men go and say nothing of their adventure, Trincules concealed Saranaces in a nearby alcove, then removed the cloak from Erskales' head.

"What is the meaning of this outrage?" demanded the head of the Holy State.

"It means that you are a prisoner, and chained to the wall of the labyrinth of Crail, where no one comes except to administer to those that die here," was the cruel answer of Trincules.

"But why am I made a prisoner?" asked Erskales.

"For political reasons that I am not at liberty to discuss with you," said Trincules.

"Am I then condemned to die here for political reasons?"

"That depends upon your conduct, perhaps. Be a good and cheerful prisoner, and you will live longer to see what fate holds for you," replied the heartless Trincules.

Then the outraged Erskales alternately prayed and cursed, declaring that the minute his absence was discovered Deioces would tear these caverns to pieces in searching for him. Saranaces chuckled, and passed on through the labyrinth to the gardens.

The labyrinth was a subcavern, so damp and gruesome that it was not used except on very rare occasions when prisoners were chained to the walls at the place called the well-hole. It was a horrible prison, yet safe from the prying eyes of the priests of the upper caverns.

It had long been whispered about that Deioces had withdrawn his confidence from Erskales, and that Saranaces would certainly be elected as the head of the Holy State at the next annual conclave. The present situation, however, would doubtless place him in Erskales' place at once, upon its being officially known that Erskales had mysteriously disappeared.

The Holy Church had been riding roughshod over the Holy State, and Deioces hoped that Saranaces might change this condition and bring about a better and more peaceful understanding. He well knew that the Church had the friendship of the Holy Crater, which made it a dangerous matter for him to resent the encroachment of the Church upon his rights.

At a single lucky stroke, due to a natural continuity of singular events, Saranaces had reached his goal; therefore he at once began to feel his power.

Returning to the gardens that he had impatiently patrolled the entire evening in an attempt to discover the movements of Cyaxares and Cambyses, he was secretly informed that three strange priests, wearing the garb of the Holy State, had been admitted into the gardens on the order of Cracillies. Two of these were

exceptionally large, while the third seemed more like a woman in disguise.

Upon hearing this information, Saranaces rushed wildly back to the entrance of the labyrinth, where Trincules was attempting to conceal the entrance by drawing the shrubbery about it.

"Come, Trincules, I cannot wait for others. You must accompany me at once," and the two went to the cleft in the wall of the labyrinth, let themselves down with ropes, and passed out of the grotto and toward the bridge leading to Baleria. Despite this haste they had been anticipated.

Cyaxares and Cambyses, bringing Scala with them, had been admitted into the gardens upon their arrival, and shortly thereafter Scala was securely put away in one of the villas, while the two men, with Cracillies, sought the latter's secret cell to discuss all the happenings of the evening.

"Something dreadful must have happened; you both look as if you are ready to collapse. Partake of this good wine, and tell me of your adventure," and Cracillies quickly gave to each a cup of wine.

"Enough has happened to prove that your theme regarding fate and destiny has an endless variety of tricks to play upon us, to keep us guessing whether fate is blind or not. A horrible thing has occurred this night, Cracillies," and Cyaxares placed his head in his hands, and groaned aloud.

"Pray tell us what all this means. Why did you not bring Saluciea here, which you said you would do?" asked Cracillies, anxiously.

"Because Saluciea is dead," moaned Cyaxares.

"Saluciea dead! O what can this mean? Saluciea dead!" and the aged priest held his clasped hands

aloft, while great tears fell down upon his hoary beard.

The other two men looked much surprised, and Cracillies, as if he had betrayed some hidden sentiment, hastily brushed away the signs of his own grief, and listened eagerly to their story of the evening.

“It is of the greatest importance that we immediately have her body brought here,” said Cracillies. “We cannot have the public mind excited at this time. Moreover, we cannot tell what Deioces may attempt upon discovering this tragedy. He has been drinking deeply for several days.”

“I cannot tell you how sad I feel over this affair. I had a great liking for Salucia. At the last moment I believed that she was only in a deep swoon for, while displaying my sudden grief, I wept over her beautiful face, and to my surprise two great pearly tears came out upon her eyelashes and dropped upon her cheeks. But she was rigid and undoubtedly dead,” moaned Cyaxares.

The priest arose quickly, saying:

“Come, get your rest, for before the day comes you must be on your way. I will take care of everything here.”

“And you will bring Salucia here, and let me know when you arrive with the body?” asked Cyaxares.

The priest hesitated, then said,

“That must be left to my discretion.”

Later in the night Cracillies came to the cell in which Cyaxares and Cambyses were resting to say that a real calamity was upon them. Saranaces was missing, and the body of Salucia had been removed from the house. It was most urgent that they should not wait till morning, but immediately prepare for their departure. He had prepared messages to be carried by Cyaxares to

Astyages and to the Holy Crater. He advised that Astyages should add also an urgent message to the Sapor. Then he handed to Cyaxares a message from Madrilla, saying:

“Madrilla requests that you permit no one to know that you carry a message from her to the Sapor. You are to open the outer covering upon reaching the Holy Crater, and read the personal message, which will fully instruct you what to do. You must deliver the sealed message, which you will find within, to the high priest, who will receive you in the inner sanctum of the palace of the Sapor. You will have the distinction of being the only ambassador that has ever been permitted a personal audience with the Sapor. Madrilla declares her message will bring you this distinction. Everything is in readiness for your departure. You will be conducted through a secret passageway to the mountains. Now, my blessings go with you. I shall await instructions from you after you have performed your pilgrimage of mercy,” and Cracillies affectionately embraced the two stalwart men.

Without they found their three henchmen and four priests ready to make the start.

During their passage through the caves Cambyses changed the whole trend of events in Ironia by a simple little trick of precaution. Telling the guides to go forward he had his men lag behind and slash the walls with their strong, short daggers. Every slash made a clean-cut mark upon the soft limestone, every four or five feet apart.

Upon reaching the outer entrance to the cave it was suggested that they rest there till the first light of day. Then, bidding them good-bye, the priests returned into the cavern.

In the early morning they looked about them, and were much surprised to find themselves near the very promontory from which they had first viewed the plains below.

At a farm, a mile away, they had left their horses. Securing the accouterments, which they had previously hidden, they now made for their horses, and were soon on their way on diplomatic missions destined to change the map of Asia Minor.

CHAPTER VII

A MISSION TO THE COURT OF ASTYAGES

PERHAPS Little Ironia was more favorably situated, having access to the sea, but Persis, occupying a great table-land, almost as rich in its soil as Ironia, was one of the richest countries in Asia, and of vastly greater importance in a political sense than Ironia. Baleria might have had a more worldly reputation for architectural beauty and bad morals, but Aspahan, the Persian capital, was a mart of immense importance.

Deioces, king of Ironia, was a despot, and was heartily hated by his agrarian subjects. Astyages was a king, and was beloved by his people.

Deioces had boasted that an hundred miles of lash and thong had made his lands productive.

Astyages had replied,

“Should one of my subjects unduly lash even an ox, he would be punished in like manner.”

By a benign, governmental supervision, the people of Persis were assured of a happy, comfortable life, participating in the prosperity of the nation, whose products were exported to all the known world. The great staples of Persis were wheat, maize, honey, beeswax, hemp and its products, wool, wood-fibres, figs, raisins, and fruits. These had made Persis famous.

Aspahan was a mart to which traders from all the markets of the world came to barter, trade, and exchange products. At the very gates of the city it

often happened that a train from one country would meet a train from another, quickly strike a bargain whereby the merchandise of one would be exchanged for that of the other, without having entered into the city, and no tribute was required of them by Astyages in such transactions. This gave to Aspahan an excellent reputation for fairness.

More than once Deioces had expressed his vexation and disapproval of the tremendous commercial growth of his rival and neighbor. So serious had the situation become that the two rulers had forbidden commercial intercourse on the part of their trading merchants. This had been, perhaps, the greatest menace to the triple alliance. At frequent intervals Deioces had placed guards in all the passes to enforce this edict. This was, however, intended as an espionage upon the people who came from, and went to, Aspahan upon the highways near his borders. This policy bid fair to involve him in war with all the surrounding nations, for the insolence of his spies extended almost to brigandage under the pretense of a right of search, consequently he modified his conduct, being content to establish a secret spy system with Zinkara at its head. So adroit was this Zinkara that not even the priests of Crail knew him by sight.

Regules' mountain house was the regular headquarters for Zinkara's force. Therefore, both coming into and going out of Little Ironia, Cyaxares and his party had avoided showing themselves as they went through the Ironian pass.

It required several days of hard and fast travel for Cyaxares to reach Aspahan, and but a single incident of importance occurred. As they emerged from the Ironian pass, and were well beyond the point which was

considered Deioces' dead line, they were abruptly challenged by two of Deioces' mounted guards. It required a foolhardy courage, born of drunkenness, for two men thus to challenge five stalwart and dangerous-looking men, as well mounted and armed as themselves, nevertheless they took the pass, and shouted,

"Ho! have you passes to go this way?"

A grim smile was on Cambyses' face as he rode slightly in advance to make reply.

"Since when do you challenge travelers beyond the house of Regules?"

"Deioces challenges anywhere," impudently replied the guard.

"Then we will show you our passes," said Cambyses savagely, and, at a move of his hand, he and his henchmen rode over the two guards like a whirlwind.

Cyaxares looked down upon the two men while the others secured the horses. The head of one was almost severed from his body, while the other had no less than three punctures through his neck and chest.

"We shall make good use of this," said Cyaxares. "Doubtless Deioces by this time believes that Astyages and the priests of Crail are working together, and this will corroborate the story regarding the prisoners held as hostages," then, with the life-blood of the fallen guards he scrawled upon the trappings of one of the steeds,

"Attacked by soldiers of Astyages."

Lashing the animal into a fury of pain and fright, to make him run away, he turned his head toward the Ironian pass, and released him. The scared animal sped like the wind, and soon disappeared.

After Cambyses' men had possessed themselves of what they found of value upon the persons of the

guards, they were left lying in the roadway, to be easily found. Hearing the howl of a jackal nearby, Cambyses had his men return and draw down two small pine trees, cut off the tops and hook the chins of the dead men onto them, then they released the trees, leaving the bodies dangling in midair, but safe from the attack of wild beasts.

The entrance into the city of Aspahan was imposing. There were no offensive formalities. At a short distance from the gates were stationed old bearded men, whose sole duty was to direct strangers how best to enter the city. At the great arched gates, for it was a strongly walled city, the guards challenged all that desired to enter, and if they were strangers, guides were sent with them to direct them where to go to reach the place of their destination. There was a gateway through which commerce entered, and one for its exit. There was a gate for the people of the city, also a gate for foreign diplomats and pleasure-seekers. Then there was the great gate for the private use of the king, of his household, and of special ambassadors from foreign countries. To this latter gate Cyaxares and his party were directed.

Here a little more rigid inspection was made, the gate being guarded by a large body of mounted soldiers.

Cyaxares, being challenged, replied,

"I am bearer of most important messages to King Astyages, and desire to be conducted to him at once."

"Show your credentials," demanded the officer.

"I am Prince Cyaxares, son of Phraortes, as these credentials will show; my message is verbal and of the greatest importance to your king, who is my father's lifelong friend. This is Cambyses, my guardsman."

At this juncture a grizzled old officer of guards saluted Cambyses cordially. They had fought side by side in many battles when Ironia and Persis were allies against Arya. The party was now turned over to this officer, and he himself conducted them to the king's palace.

An audience with the king was arranged for the following morning. Cyaxares and his party were assigned to comfortable quarters. Astyages sent cordial greeting to Cyaxares and bade him take all the liberties of the city. This was a great pleasure to Cyaxares for he had never before visited Aspahan, notwithstanding the close friendship existing between his father and the king.

Cambyses, placing his men under proper escort, bade them take a day of freedom and have a pleasurable time, while he and Cyaxares, under the escort of his old soldier friend, joined the throngs of strangers filling every street and byway.

Originally certain streets had been set aside as market-places, but so vast had become the commerce of the city that even the private streets leading to the palace were used unchallenged. It had long been a scandal in Ironia that laces and bonbons could be bought on the steps of Astyages' palace. It was a wonderful sight, this beehive of barter and trade. Cyaxares found himself so filled with excitement that he exclaimed with delight at every turn at the endless varieties of merchandise of every conceivable kind and from every known country.

Here was a long line of snowy stalls filled to overflowing with luscious fruits, with their bright colors and tantalizing odors. The stalls were beautifully decorated with fruits, suspended in clusters, and with

many flowers. They were presided over by rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed, cheerful, and happy young maidens, as tempting as the fruits themselves. What a lark it was, to be sure, to have this freedom, a liberty as unlike the licentious revels in the streets of Baleria as night differs from day. Here all was innocent, respectful banter of joyous hearts and of clean minds. The young women everywhere were not slow to discover that Cyaxares was a foreign nobleman; his proud bearing and his handsome features and person made him a constant target for friendly banter and amorous glances as he passed through the streets.

Young women mounted upon small white ponies, and surrounded by innumerable baskets filled with fruits, berries, and flowers, urged on their plump, lazy little animals. Other men and women pushed small pink, blue, white, and yellow wagons with little pies, tarts, cakes, and raspberry juice as their stock in trade, and these met with ready sale.

And now Cyaxares and his party had reached the more important and dignified districts where were sold the richer and more expensive wares. This was instructive. Here were the people from Arya with their linen fabrics so finely woven that the meshes could not be discerned by the naked eye; the Kadaehons, with their bright-colored yarns and worsteds, and the queer little people that came down once each year from the steppes to the north of the Caspian sea to sell their wares, carved by hand in grotesque or graceful designs. The Bahans brought an endless variety of carpets, rugs, and curtains, woven of silk and wool in fantastical or graceful patterns. In this long, clean, white booth were linens, damask, and fleecy laces made by the people of the Holy Crater. Here one found things

wrought of filigreed silver, brass, and copper, also steel swords and knives from Bagdad and Massula, and from the far Eastern countries spices and silk, ivory and gold, and sparkling gems and jewels.

What a wonderful object lesson it all was.

They came upon a broad façade, circular in shape, with a large fountain in its center. Around this circle were the flower venders, said to be the handsomest young women in all the world. Their stalls were sweet and clean, and garlanded in the most artistic fashion. Each young woman sat playing upon either an eleven stringed harp, a reed flute, or beating a small, bedecked tambourine. It was most fascinating. The air was redolent with the odors of the flowers.

"Who are these people? They are a distinct race from all others that we have seen," remarked Cyaxares.

"They are pure blooded Aryans. They began to come here from the steppes about the Caspian sea some eight years ago. They are under special protection by a treaty between the king and the Sapor. They are not only beautiful, as you see, but they are the most gentle and sweet-tempered people, perhaps, in all the world."

Cyaxares marveled at their beautiful hair and delicate complexions, their large blue eyes and luxurious persons. They reminded him of Madrilla; surely she was of this race. She had the same smile, of such penetrating sweetness that it was almost painful at times. It seemed like a wistful desire to be loved and caressed, and yet there was a protecting dignity with it that forbade liberties. While the men were strong they were not so handsome as the women.

The city was as clean as Baleria, but lacked the cold, ornate architecture. Licentious luxury was the first

idea in Baleria. Utility and genuine pleasure and comfort were the essential things in Aspahan.

If it was interesting in daytime it was more so at nightfall. There was no music in Baleria; harmony was lacking in the souls of the people. In Aspahan music was the outpouring of happy hearts. It was heard everywhere. Even the young children were excellent musicians. Between the flower-stalls were narrow passageways leading into mysterious little theaters, where the people sat and ate, and sipped their wine, while they conversed, listened to the music, and watched some athletic sports or some form of theatricals.

As Cyaxares and his party would enter these places, and were at once recognized as the king's guests, because of the little gilded staff carried by the guiding officer, food and drink were offered to them free of cost, and they were treated in the most respectful and hospitable manner. Here, truly, was an enlightened and advancing civilization, a happy and prosperous people under a just and sane ruler. Cyaxares conceived a high regard for Astyages, and by comparison a correspondingly increased disgust for Deioces.

In a single generation this commerce had increased a thousand-fold, at which even the stolid Cambyses was astonished. He had seen Aspahan when it was less prosperous.

"It seems impossible," said Cyaxares. "Here are people of many nationalities, but one sees none of the evidences of crime so noticeable in Baleria. Are not all people constituted alike? Why this difference?"

"Crime is a species of commerce. There is no profit in crime here. Therefore it has no license, to the contrary it is punished by banishment. Life in Aspahan

is too pleasant for any one to risk being shown to her gates, for they are never permitted to return," replied the king's guide.

"What a lesson for Baleria," sighed Cyaxares.

"Lesson!" exclaimed Cambyses. "Why, should you apply such a rule to Baleria, you would depopulate her in a day; you would have to widen the Ironian pass to let the people through."

Cyaxares laughed at Cambyses' pessimistic views regarding Baleria.

"But there is another reason for the morality of this city," said the guide. "Its population, that is, its floating population, comes mainly from the land, and it is a singular fact that country people as compared with seafaring people show greater morality and a less tendency toward the lower forms of debauchery and immorality in their daily lives. We are comparatively free from licentiousness here, yet the people have practically the same personal freedom that the people in Baleria have."

"That is worthy of further consideration. I shall bear it in mind," replied Cyaxares.

And thus they put in the day, and a part of the night, greatly to the pleasure and edification of the visitors.

At midnight when all noise and revelry ceased, quite weary from their arduous day's work, Cyaxares and Cambyses returned to their quarters. Comfortably seated in their luxurious quarters, over a flagon of wine they discussed the events that had most deeply impressed them.

"My dear Cambyses, I am greatly impressed with the manifest prosperity of this city. Had I a less urgent reason, I should despair of inducing Astyages

to go to war with Deioces. Any ruler would hesitate to disturb his people so set in peace and plenty. Moreover, I can see from this viewpoint other contingencies. Other rulers than Deioces must be jealous of this unusual condition here, and did they see profit to themselves in an alliance with Deioces against Astyages, and could assure themselves that there would be no holy war, we might find ourselves confronted by tremendous forces, which Astyages alone could not successfully combat."

"The coöperation of the Sapor is essential, and you are most fortunate in having the same cause to present to both these kings," said Cambyses.

"Yes, that is true, Cambyses. No self-respecting king would calmly submit to this outrageous insult, and this will be taken advantage of to punish Deioces for rudely forbidding commerce between Little Ionia and Aspahan. Deioces is insulted that his own littleness is reflected in Astyages' growing commercial prosperity, and there is a possibility of his having chosen this method of insulting Astyages in order to draw him into a war. If this be true, Madrilla's keeping her identity concealed turned his intended insult into a disaster to himself. Madrilla's life was truly in danger. It is marvelous that he did not immediately destroy her upon learning her true identity."

"Astyages will hesitate to enter Little Ionia to war on Deioces. In fact he would not do so without the consent of the Sapor," said Cambyses.

"He will not be asked to send any army into Ionia. I am positive that Deioces will bring his army out before we can be fully prepared for him. Nevertheless, I am going to strain every point to consummate the plan that I have outlined in my mind, and that is to

draw Deioces outside to attack Astyages, and then slip a sufficient force in behind him to cut off his base of supplies and prevent his retreat through the passes; then have the Sapor's forces cut him to pieces upon the open plains."

"Well planned," declared Cambyses, enthusiastically.

After discussing many important angles of the situation they bade each other good-night.

Cambyses was a case-hardened soldier, therefore to bed meant quick sleep for him. But not so with Cyaxares, who lay till early morning planning his coming audience with the king. The refreshing hour's sleep that overtook him at daybreak seemed to quell the riotous blood in his veins, calm his brain, and lull his tired nerves. When Cambyses greeted him later he was none the wiser but that Cyaxares had enjoyed a refreshing night's sleep.

At eleven o'clock they went to the palace; an hour later Astyages cordially greeted them in his private audience chamber, only one court official being present. The king openly congratulated Cyaxares upon his splendid manhood, mentioning the close friendship that had always existed between himself and Phraortes.

Cyaxares, in well chosen phrases, attempted to return the compliment by praising the king's appearance of good health, when the latter with a deprecatory gesture exclaimed: "Say not so, my son. I am in the greatest mental and physical distress. I am an old and tottering man. But that is not my bereavement. My daughter, Almareta, you have doubtless heard your father speak of her. She has as mysteriously disappeared as if swallowed by the earth. Desiring to avoid a scandal I have concealed the truth from all but the few confidential persons that are scouring the

earth for her without avail. I am glad that you have come, Cyaxares. You are young, and strong and courageous, perhaps you may comfort me in some manner, or give me some advice that will alleviate this anguish that is consuming my very soul."

"Your Majesty knows how this distresses me, not only because of my father's esteem for you, but also on my own account. It, therefore, gives me corresponding joy to bring to you tidings of your beloved daughter," said Cyaxares.

"You bring tidings of my Almareta!" exclaimed Astyages, quickly arising from his seat and taking the young prince by the hands.

"Yes, your Majesty, and good tidings, too. While she cannot come immediately to you, she is in temporary safety. I am here to offer you my services in rescuing her, for she is, practically, a prisoner."

Forgetting his extreme age and infirmities the king raised himself erect, clinched his hands, and said:

"My daughter a prisoner! Who would dare to detain my daughter?"

"I beg your Majesty to be calm and permit me to explain. This is a most delicate situation. For the time being your daughter is safe from immediate danger. I vouch for that. It is essential that I tell you the story in full, and I beg that you permit me to call into your presence my lifelong guardian, Cambyses, who helped me to take your daughter to safety."

"Cambyses helped to rescue my daughter? His father was my sworn enemy," muttered Astyages.

"Cambyses himself will prove to be one of your best friends, I stake my honor on this," replied the prince.

The king commanded his chamberlain to bring Cambyses into the room.

“Cyaxares assures me that you are my friend, Cambyses,” said Astyages, looking the old warrior earnestly in the face.

“My father upon his death-bed declared that I should not inherit his prejudices, and he bade me especially to bear you no ill-will because of his sentiments toward you. I shall heed his dying wishes. I am sincerely at your service, your Majesty,” replied Cambyses.

“Said like a good soldier, Cambyses. I shall count you among my confidential friends. You have a good companion, Cyaxares, and I shall strive to be worthy the love of both of you. Now, do tell me about my daughter.”

“Her abduction was a most outrageous thing, and death is too good for him who so basely betrayed you. Her rescue will involve you in war with Deioces. It was he that attempted to steal her away,” said Cyaxares.

“Deioces!” exclaimed Astyages, and his face betrayed the greatest alarm.

“A more contemptible dog never breathed,” said Cyaxares. “His time has come. He calculated without weighing the consequences. Learning from a secret source that your daughter was a prisoner in Deioces’ palace, and knowing that he was racked with fear over his own drunken deed, I, with Cambyses, went directly into the palace, demanded an audience with Deioces at midnight, which he granted. Then I took the responsibility of demanding in your name that your daughter be immediately placed under my protection. You will be astonished to know that this demand was at once complied with, and we succeeded in getting away with our lives and in safely placing your daugh-

ter in the care of Cracillies, in the gardens of Crail. We may thank the gods in heaven that we were in time to save your daughter a chaste woman, for Deioces is a fiend."

"A chaste woman!" exclaimed Astyages. "Do you mean to say that Deioces would dare to outrage my daughter?"

"It is said that he outraged his own sister," replied Cyaxares.

"That is true; that is true. I will prove my gratitude to you, Cyaxares. I know your ambitions; go on, go on."

"Your Majesty will be doubly shocked to know that at the same time that Deioces seized your daughter he also took her companion, whose identity he did not know. This proved his undoing. It was Madrilla, daughter of the Sapor."

"The gods protect us. The whole world cannot pay the forfeit. It means a holy war," wailed Astyages.

"Your Majesty's daughter being the companion of the Princess Madrilla makes you the natural ally of the Holy Crater."

"But my age and infirmities cause me to dread war. I could not survive the necessary negotiations with the Holy Crater."

"I will spare you all the hardships of such a campaign. I, too, have a cause, and I wish to seize this opportunity to right my father's wrongs."

"Yes, yes, Cyaxares, you are quite right, and you have my sympathy and shall have my aid, and, moreover, I can tell you that the Holy Crater is friendly to your cause. Let me hear your plans. War in some form is inevitable. I see that. I am in honor bound

to make war immediately against Deioces, but perhaps there is some way by which a sweeping holy war may be avoided. Give me your views."

"I gratefully thank your Majesty for the assurance of your friendship. My plan is simple and one to be quickly put into execution. I propose to bring Deioces' army out of Little Ironia, then slip a sufficient army in behind him to cut off his base of supplies and his retreat. Your Majesty's army must be prepared to hold this city against his siege until the army of the Sapor comes to do the balance."

"But can Deioces be induced to come out?"

"I shall request of your Majesty one thousand courageous and well accoutered men to be placed under the command of Cambyses as captain general. I will guarantee to have Deioces' army hammering at your gates within thirty days."

"And the Sapor?"

"Will come to your relief on the ground of a common cause. With the early destruction of Deioces' army the cause for war will cease, and a general holy war will be inconsistent because of the present peaceful and friendly relations existing between you and all your neighboring nations. My father will be restored to his throne, and the purging of Baleria will be my especial duty."

"Very thoroughly planned, Cyaxares, but how may we best go about obtaining the close coöperation of the Sapor?"

"I request that your Majesty appoint me a special ambassador to the Holy Crater to seek the aid of the Sapor. Incidentally I shall plead my own cause."

"And what is Deioces' present attitude?"

"He is totally in the dark as to what is going on,

and beside himself with rage. A most fortunate combination of circumstances enabled us to seize and imprison in the caverns of Crail his chief of guards, Paulius, Zinkara, his chief of spies, and Crecies, his murderous executioner. They may be held prisoners indefinitely, for the priests of Crail are not suspected of having them in their power. You are doubtless aware that the priests and the Holy Church are violently opposed to Deioces."

"Yes, I am aware of the very bad political situation there. Do you contemplate a simultaneous revolution in Little Ironia?"

"Yes, we have arms for two thousand within the caverns of Crail, and Cracillies will take Baleria the moment the word is given."

"How many men on a war footing has Deioces?"

"Thirty thousand, ready to take the field."

"I can only place twenty thousand men under arms immediately."

"That will be ample for your defense. I will look to the Holy Crater for my soldiers," replied Cyaxares.

"Cyaxares, you have planned well. Were I twenty years younger I would take the field myself. As it is I shall place much confidence in both you and your staunch friend Cambyses. I shall immediately call a council of war. By to-morrow noon Cambyses will have at his disposal one thousand picked men. At sunrise to-morrow morning an ample escort will be ready to take you with every comfort and with all speed to the Holy Crater."

"I want only the comforts of my men," said Cyaxares.

"A good soldier," responded the king.

"I will prepare messages for you to carry to the

Holy Crater. But, tell me, Cyaxares, who in Baleria knows ought of this?"

"Only Cracillies and Saranaces."

"Saranaces! Do you believe him to be your friend? You are aware that it has been rumored that, were Erskales out of the way, Saranaces would become head of the Holy State. Moreover, it is a well founded piece of gossip that Erskales has been openly charged by Deioces with being too attentive to Saluciea, his mistress, thereby losing the king's confidence."

"It is commonly admitted in Baleria," replied Cyaxares, deeming it wise to make no mention of the tragic end of Saluciea at this time.

"Are you aware that Saluciea is the sister of Saranaces?" said Astyages.

"Only at the last moment of my stay in Baleria did I hear of this," replied Cyaxares.

"Yes, Saranaces was a plodding farmer. He and his beautiful sister, Saluciea, pushed a vegetable cart through the streets of Baleria. The story goes that one day Deioces was attracted by the beautiful face and figure of the rosy young country girl, then eighteen years old, had her brought to the palace, and made her his mistress. It was said that the little farm of Saranaces was not confiscated because of the love of one of Deioces' high officials for Saluciea's mother. Saluciea was educated under Deioces' guidance, and she is a wonderfully wily woman. Saranaces was also educated for the priesthood. If I am not mistaken the mother is in some manner under the protection of the priests of Crail."

Cyaxares and Cambyses had strange misgivings, which they dared not reveal. Hoping to change the trend of the conversation, Cyaxares asked,

"May I inquire of your Majesty regarding your son Claudies?"

"Speak not to me of my son," passionately exclaimed Astyages. "He is a profligate. I have disowned him, and have expelled him from Aspahan. He sacrificed himself to that low-born daughter of Regules. Where you find one you will doubtless find the other."

Again the two men exchanged startled glances.

"Are you aware that Scala is the boon companion and protégée of Saluciea?" asked Cyaxares.

"Where, at the court of Deioces?"

"No, your Majesty, in a secret rendezvous in Baleria."

"Then deep intrigue is abroad. Prompt action is necessary. Prepare for your journey. I will give you full authority to act for me at the court of the Sapor."

"I thank your Majesty. Cambyses has three faithful men trained to all the cunning and diplomacy of warfare. Trust Cambyses implicitly. I pledge my honor for his integrity and good conduct."

"Let Deioces' army come unmolested to the very walls of your city. I will prevent its retreat while the clans of the Holy Crater settle upon it like bees."

Astyages now bade them an affectionate good-bye, saying that his blessings and prayers went with them. They returned to their quarters to analyze fully the situation.

CHAPTER VIII

CAMBYSES RETURNS TO THE CAVERNS OF CRAIL

“**W**HAT manner of mess is this we are in?” growled Cambyses, upon their reaching their quarters.

“That is what we must ascertain, if possible,” replied Cyaxares.

“Now, which of all the scoundrels that we met in Baleria was the prodigal son?” asked Cambyses.

“Surely none that I can recognize,” responded Cyaxares.

“Do you believe that Saranaces’ plotting is of long standing, or that his ambition extends beyond a desire to be head of the Holy State?”

“No, I do not, Cambyses, and I have a very definite opinion to express about Saranaces’ actions. While he felt reasonably certain that he would be chosen over Erskales at the next conclave, he was watching every opportunity to strengthen his position in the good graces of Deioces. Our dropping into Baleria, and the strange happenings that so quickly followed, opened new possibilities to Saranaces, and his cunning brain immediately began to plan for his own profit. This was the beginning of his plotting against us. I am the only aspirant for Deioces’ throne. He feels reasonably sure that I would advocate Cracillies for Erskales’ position, therefore, should I by some stroke of fortune dethrone Deioces, his honors would be short-lived. It would be of tremendous benefit to himself

to dispose of me, because this not only would make certain his promotion, but it would also place Deioces under lifelong obligations to him for removing the greatest nightmare that has ever disturbed his slumbers."

"To this end Saranaces took his sister, Salucia, into his confidence, only to the extent of allowing her to believe that my capture would result in my being expelled from Little Ironia. It had not occurred to her that my being caught in her company was worse than high treason. Her actions betrayed this."

"That coincides with my beliefs exactly," said Cambyses.

"But things have changed now," continued Cyaxares. "We escaped and Salucia fell a victim to her own brother's plot. Sooner or later, if not now, Deioces must know of the sad ending of Salucia, and I am wondering what the effect will be upon Saranaces' fortunes, for there is some mysterious tie between his family and Deioces. It must be of grave importance, else Cracillies would have told us, for he undoubtedly knows."

"I have a feeling that the two princesses are not safe, as matters now stand. I should like to know more of this mother of Saranaces, of whom King Astyages spoke. She may be in a position to betray the whole situation," said Cambyses.

"And for that very reason, Cambyses, I suggest that you, after placing guards in every highway leading toward Ironia, select some good men and secretly return to the caverns of Crail, and advise Cracillies of what we have done, and learn from him any new developments that have occurred there since our leaving."

“I fear that we are overlooking the serious phase of the whole matter, Cyaxares. Suppose that Saranaces, recognizing that war between Deioces and Astyages and the Holy Crater is inevitable, should attempt to return the two princesses to their respective homes, thereby taking credit to himself for their rescue from Deioces in order to gain the good-will of Astyages and the Sapor, would that not create a singular complication?”

“For that very reason all the passes must be fully guarded. Not one person must be permitted to pass into Ironia, and every person coming out must be detained for your inspection and judgment. Only our inspired news must reach Baleria and Deioces. From day to day some trusted messenger must circulate among the people that which we wish said to them against Deioces, and news must go direct to Deioces to vex and incense him into declaring war upon Astyages. He must do this to cover up the real cause of war, which he knows must come. I am depending upon this, more than any other thing, to draw his declaration of war the moment he can gather the full sense and meaning of the strange situation surrounding him. Astyages must get the credit for all these strange disappearances. Word must go to Deioces that the two princesses have been returned to their homes, and every possible chance of a leak from the caverns of Crail must be stopped.”

“You may leave all that to me,” replied Cambyses. “I will place a signal corps in position to keep me in touch with your movements until you are within Little Ironia, with all retreats for Deioces’ army cut off. I swear that I will have Deioces’ army outside the passes in thirty days, therefore quick action on your part is

necessary. But I was about to ask you, how about Cracillies?"

"Cracillies is my father's lifelong friend; he is a different clay from Saranaces; his father before him was of noble birth. The maps he made for me attest his sincerity; not even Saranaces is aware of their existence."

"Well, there is a possibility of Saranaces' betraying to Deioces the hiding-place of the young princesses, and of his attempting to recover them," said Cambyses.

"And thus bring annihilation upon Ironia. You forget the terms of the triple alliance. These young women are now the wards of the Holy Church, and Deioces dare not make a demand for them, unless he be a madman. It is not fear of Deioces' acts that causes me to desire their presence there to remain a secret. It is to keep Deioces guessing, and to prevent his attempting surreptitiously to capture them upon their leaving the protection of Crail," explained Cyaxares.

The next morning Cyaxares, accompanied by Cimetus, a high official of King Astyages' court, and by a splendid retinue, set out for the Holy Crater, the seat of the Sapor, the King of Kings. It meant many days of hard travel and a camp life equal to the emergencies of war.

It was said that the Sapor, by a single tap of a silver gong, could bring, armed and equipped for war, a million fanatical soldiers. All Asia had a fear and dread of hearing that fateful sound.

Cambyses a few hours later gave to his captains their instructions, and Ironia was a sealed book. He established a secret rendezvous as his headquarters, to which every person coming from, or attempting to pass

into, Baleria was to be brought for his inspection. The mountain house of Regules was put under military restraint.

Taking twelve picked men, besides his three trusty guardsmen, Cambyses went directly to the spot where was the mountain outlet to the caverns of Crail. Hep-tes was given charge of the men, with instructions to keep wholly in concealment, and to intercept any one coming out of, or attempting to pass into, the caverns, unless it be Cracillies himself.

Taking with him Kapies and Candes, he went to the spot where they had formerly concealed the priestly garbs, which they now brought out and donned. Then he passed down the trail and toward the city of Baleria. Desiring to enter the city at a later hour, upon reaching the bridge they concealed themselves in the reeds and watched the occasional passers.

Two muffled figures were seen hurrying from the direction of the caverns of Crail. Their suspicious actions attracted Cambyses' attention, and singly he and his men trailed them. It did not require much time to vindicate his suspicions, for the two men went directly to the house where Salucia and Scala had their rendezvous.

Half an hour later the men emerged. One was carrying a package and was attempting to draw his cowl over his face. It was Saranaces. The other had discarded his priestly garb, and now appeared in a dandified court dress. He carelessly threw over his shoulders a long, brown cloak. They paused for a moment, then started away in opposite directions. Suddenly the priest returned, placed the package inside the lattice, and hurried after the younger man. Motioning Candes to follow, Cambyses sprang quickly inside the

lattice and shook open the package, allowing the contents to fall upon the floor. Seizing a rug he threw it into the robe and refolded it, barely having time to replace it where Saranaces had left it, and again get into concealment.

The priest returned, picked up the package, and hurried away. Candes reported to Cambyses that Saranaces had called to the younger man, saying, "Come out through the gate in the wall." Then he came back for his package. It was now of the gravest importance for some quick action to be taken. Cambyses' mind was working like a windmill. Bidding his men follow, he removed his priest's robe, quickly overtook Saranaces, and cast it over his head. Lifting the priest in his great strong arms, they slipped back through the dark street to the house, kicked open the light inner door, and deposited his burden upon the floor. Then he proceeded to tie him, hand and foot. Saranaces could not guess who his captors were. Heptes was left to watch him while Cambyses and Candes hurried to the door in the dead-wall back of the palace.

For nearly an hour they lurked in the shadows, keeping a surveillance over the door. Cambyses grew fearful that a mistake had been made. It was very possible that the man would not come that night. The warning might have meant any time. But now the door was opening. Yes, it was he. From beneath his cloak he took a package, and placed it upon the ground to enable him properly to close and lock the door. Then he picked up his package and started on his way.

Cambyses instructed Candes to hasten to the house, hide behind the lattice, and seize and muffle him,

should he return there, and he himself would follow to make sure that he did not go elsewhere.

The man returned directly to the house, with Cambyses close upon his heels. As he entered the veranda the tremendous weight of Candes crumpled him up like a reed, and he was quickly muzzled. It was all done so quietly that Saranaces was unaware of the second capture. Cambyses instructed his men to keep them separated, and to make their way to the bridge, their feet having been freed to enable them to walk. Each was told that the least outcry, or attempt to escape, would mean instant death. He himself rolled up the first contents of Saranaces' package, tucked both packs under his arms, and followed closely after them. He made no attempt to examine the contents of the packages, but he knew that they contained some valuable evidence of some kind.

He was overjoyed at this night's success. He had accomplished in a few hours what might have required weeks to do. The same remarkable luck seemed to attend Cyaxares' cause. He had gone to the city intending to prowl about and learn what he could about Saluciea, for in his mind her death would prove an important political event. He knew that for a small piece of silver the beggars infesting the fountains would give him all the latest gossip. On the following day he intended to make his way into the caverns. This changed their plans.

Without accident they reached the bridge beyond which lay safety. Before daylight they were again at the mountain entrance to the caverns. Their prisoners were scarcely able to stand upon their feet after the fatiguing trip up the rough mountain trail. They were kept blindfolded and each ignorant of the

other's presence. All were permitted to rest till daylight came.

Taking the two packages to a secluded spot Cambyses opened them. He laughed heartily as he viewed the contents of the first one. It plainly told the story of Saranaces' disloyalty to Cyaxares. It was undoubtedly his intention secretly to restore the two young princesses to their people. There were riding-boots for a man and a woman, and the usual woman's riding costume, formerly the property of Saluciea. There were gloves and bonnet, beautifully embroidered with gold lace and silk, fit for a princess. The man's boots bore the crest and name of Deioces.

"Ha, ha, it would be dangerous to go galloping through the caverns of Crail, and I hardly believe one would be permitted to take a daily ride in the gardens, therefore I must conclude that some fair lady was to be escorted over the mountain trails. But why only one, I wonder, and which one? I shall assume that it is the one that will bring the earliest good fortune to Saranaces, and that would be Almareta. . . . Now, let's see what secret is wrapped in this mournful black cloth. It felt as if it weighed a ton before I arrived here."

Upon removing the outer cloth Cambyses uttered an exclamation of surprise as he stared at a magnificently wrought treasure chest, made of hand-beaten silver, and inlaid with golden flowers, fruits, and birds. The handles were solid gold. Across its top, from corner to corner, wrought in sparkling gems, glowed the name "Saluciea."

Lying with this box was a smaller one of plain beaten silver. It contained a gentleman's gold-mounted toilet set. Examining the box more closely

he found something to give him a shock. There, in almost invisible inlaid gold, was the name "Claudies."

The plot was plain; Saranaces had bribed the out-cast son of Astyages to bring away from the palace the rich jewels of Salucia, and Claudies was to use the return of his sister, Almaretta, as a means of again getting into the good graces of his father. Claudies had been a hanger-on about Deioces' palace for some time.

What a fortunate stroke this was; surely Baleria was Cyaxares' lucky spot. The embarrassing plot had been nipped at a critical moment, and the dangerous Saranaces was now sure to be put out of the way. As long as he was at large he was an extremely dangerous quantity.

Upon attempting to open the treasure box Cambyses found it locked. He bade Candes to search Claudies, and bring to him all that he found on his person.

Claudies fought strenuously against what he termed this indignity, nevertheless he was searched to the very marrow, and Candes placed before Cambyses the key to the chest, a large key for opening the door in the palace wall, some rings and trinkets, some rare lace handkerchiefs bearing the crest of Deioces, and a doubly sealed packet.

Cambyses quickly opened the chest and peered within. The richest gems that he had ever looked upon were there, not only those belonging to Salucia but many rare pieces belonging to Deioces. In the bottom of the chest was a cloth-lined compartment, completely filled with gold and silver coins.

With a grunt of satisfaction Cambyses closed the chest, carefully concealed it, and then examined the

packet. It was addressed on the outside to Astyages, and bore the seals of the Holy Church and of the Holy State. Breaking it open, he found that it contained letters made on parchment. One was a letter to Astyages, written by Saranaces. Cambyses smiled as he read:

“To his most holy Majesty, King Astyages, ruler over Persis and royal party to the triple alliance, greetings:

“With a contrite heart and an oppressive sense of grave duty, I address myself to the most generous King Astyages on matters of great importance, insomuch as I declare to his Majesty the perfect safety under my care of his daughter, who has been in recent peril.

“As I myself am a man of peace, I urge as condonement for my mentioning matters that may stir deep anger in your generous heart the heinous nature of the offense. It would be nothing short of criminal for me to conceal the truth and facts.

“I deplore the necessity of having to mention the name of one whose father was once my sovereign, my benefactor, and my friend, but I shall tell the whole truth, and in telling it I shall express to your Majesty those things that are corroding my heart from long suppression for want of a consistent right to address your Majesty on so serious a subject.

“King Deioces is a despot, and at heart a vile, bad man. He conceived the idea of abducting your daughter, and the daughter of the Sapor, for his own vile and lustful purposes, believing that he could do this secretly, and without discovery.

“It is shocking to have to relate this, but it is true. The Prince Cyaxares, son of Phraortes, and his henchman, Cambyses, whose father was your bitter enemy, engaged for a reward to perpetrate this crime for Deioces, and succeeded so far as to bring both the young princesses to Baleria. By the most fortunate circumstance I had the

honor to learn of this diabolical plot before they could report their presence to Deioeces. I intercepted them, and on the day of the annual pilgrimage to the shrine of the Holy State, when they, during the excitement of the festivities, were to smuggle their victims into the palace, I had the house in which they were concealed surrounded and kept it under constant guard, preventing their removal. I have declared them wards of the holy trinity, and have thus thwarted Deioeces from making demands for them.

“Fearing an equally odious outrage, should their beastly captors be left alone in the house with them, I have secretly conveyed them to the gardens of Crail where they have every care and comfort, awaiting the will of your Majesty. They in the meantime are under the protection of my own mother, the matron of the priestesses of Crail, and shall so remain until your Majesty may send a proper escort to convey them away from our caverns.

“I have entrusted this communication to your son Claudies, who, with a contrite and penitent heart, craves your forgiveness, and I humbly add my prayers to his petition. He feels the deep humiliation of the outrage on the part of Deioeces, and of his equally guilty agents, and he prays that he may be designated by you to escort his sister to safety.

“I must report a most unfortunate circumstance in this connection. Cyaxares and Cambyses had confederates in hiding, and these pounced upon my guards and released their masters, who fled Baleria, and will doubtless carry to your Majesty some plausible story to free themselves from their unenviable situation.

“I have the utmost confidence in Claudies. He will guide your messenger to me, and I will return your daughter to your Majesty.

“I am loyal to the triple alliance; I am loyal to the Holy Church, and I am obedient to your Majesty’s will. I pledge you the friendship of the priests of Crail.

“SARANACES.”

The second document read:

“Saranaces:

“The pact between the Holy State and the Holy Church specifically demands that we stand together in the defense of morality and righteousness. I am shocked beyond measure at this outrageous and high-handed affair. I can no longer hold the same respect for our sovereign, who thus shows himself so devoid of shame and common decency. Neither can I condone an affront of this heinous character against the other sovereigns of the triple alliance. As for the fiends that have aided in this crime, 'tis but justice that they be captured at the earliest time, and turned over to the tender mercies of his Majesty, King Astyages. I and all the powers of my high office are at your command in the correction of this terrible mistake that reflects discredit alike upon both branches of our alliance until full correction and contrite apologies are made.

“Let us pray that it may not bring upon us a justifiable war.

“I am loyal to the triple alliance; I am loyal to the union of State and Church, and I am your obedient servant and friend,
ERSKALES.”

As Cambyses read these outrageous documents his anger knew no bounds. It was Saranaces' plot. Erskales knew nothing of it. Moreover, it was evidently the purpose to smuggle Scala out of the caverns, and to permit her to flee with Claudies to the city of Aspahan. It was of the gravest importance to hold both the men prisoners, and to keep each ignorant of the capture of the other. The absence of any mention of Cracillies' name was suggestive that he was in no manner connected with Saranaces' plotting. What the final purpose of the plot was could only be conjectured. But Deioces had once made himself king while

Phraortes was at war; why then could not Saranaces emulate Deioces' example? He had in his message condemned both Deioces and Cyaxares; who could he have in mind to take their places?

What greater piece of good fortune could have happened than the capture of these culprits and these dangerous documents? Cambyses swore that this secret method of warfare was the most effective that he had ever seen to terrify and demoralize an enemy.

Cracillies must be communicated with at once. It was essential that no mistake be made at this critical stage of the game. He sent Heptes and Candes into the caverns with instructions to follow the slashes which they had formerly made with their knives, and to reach Cracillies with an urgent message to come at once to him. It would have been suicidal for the two men to attempt to reach the inner garden in the absence of the marks upon the walls. Cambyses' wily precaution had quickly borne fruit. An hour passed, then another, and no word came back. Finally, Cambyses could be patient no longer. Placing Kapies with a strong guard over his prisoners and the treasure, he with four strong men took flambeaux and entered the caverns.

They had proceeded more than half the distance when they heard the clatter and clash of arms, and above it all the roar of Heptes' voice cursing his enemies.

Rushing toward the tumult, they were surprised to find four husky priests holding Heptes and Candies at bay with strong staffs, while other priests were piling stones in a narrow entrance as if to conceal it. Hurrying to the rescue, Cambyses and his fresh men soon had the priests in retreat. Together with the other

priests they fled away into the darkness of a lateral branch of the cave.

The stones being removed, they found lying upon the floor a muffled figure, bound hand and foot. Cutting his bonds and releasing the prisoner, Cambyses was astonished to find that it was Cracillies himself, who explained that only these few of the priests were in revolt and in sympathy with Saranaces, who was by some mysterious influence free, and was carrying forward some dastardly plot, for he had succeeded in capturing and smuggling into the lower labyrinth Erskales, who was now chained to the walls of the well-hole. It was this discovery on his part that had caused the guilty priests to set upon him, and had not Cambyses come to his rescue at this critical time he would have perished at their hands.

Fearful for the safety of the princesses, Cambyses inquired regarding them.

Cracillies explained that Scala had been given greater liberty than it was intended that she should have, and it was his belief that Saranaces had either given her her liberty, or was concealing her with that purpose in view. At least she could not be found. It was while searching for her that he had discovered Erskales.

He had immediately called a council, and it was decided to bar Saranaces from again entering the caverns. It was impossible to determine who were the traitors without swearing the priests individually. As false swearing in the order was punishable by branding and banishment, in order to avoid this danger, sixteen of the priests refused to come out of the caverns, thereby confessing their guilt. They were sworn out of the society of the priests of Crail.

Cracillies alone went in search of them. Eight had willingly returned with him, and they were now chained in the well-hole. But the others were bolder, had captured Cracillies, and were caught walling him up alive to die of hunger and thirst. These eight priests were now themselves prisoners in the cave into which they had fled. They must surrender or starve.

The young princesses were safe, having been taken from the charge of the matron.

The insurrection now being in hand, it was essential that Erskales be placed under closer confinement, but given better comforts, to prevent every possible opportunity of his escaping and going to Deioces for redress, which would reveal some kind of plot against the State.

Paulius, Zinkara, and Crecies were closely confined in secret cells. Cracillies must be trusted to carry into rigid execution all these essential details, even to the restraint of the superior, whom Cracillies now admitted was Saranaces' mother. Trincules, having inadvertently boasted of having helped Saranaces in the capture of Erskales, was himself placed in the same chains.

Leaving his men to wall up the entrance to the lateral cave, into which the renegade priests had fled, Cambyses conducted Cracillies to the outer entrance, and showed him the documentary evidence of Saranaces' treachery. The aged priest was amazed at the duplicity of his former associate.

"Cyaxares' cause is sure of success," he declared to Cracillies. "Astyages has issued orders of war. Under my command, as Astyages' captain general, every pass into Ironia is blocked. Cyaxares is now on his way to the Holy Crater as the special ambassador

of Astyages. . . . And now, my dear Cracillies, I speak for Cyaxares. When he becomes king of Ironia, you will be the head of the Holy State, and at last there will be harmony between the State and the Church. I heard him say so, and I will pledge my life upon his keeping his word. It is for you to remember that you are not, like Saranaces, attempting by intrigue to advance your fortunes and ambitions. You are by the logic of events promised a high position of honor upon your own merits. You know the people, their wants, their needs, their sufferings; you are the logical leader of a justifiable revolution. They will follow you at a word, Cracillies. Will you, in the cause of reform, lead your people against Deioces the moment that war is on, and that you receive word from Cyaxares to strike?"

Cracillies had listened attentively to this earnest appeal, but betrayed no undue excitement. As Cambyses ceased speaking, he calmly replied:

"I am already pledged to the people and to the cause of Cyaxares. Believing that Saranaces was loyal, and knowing that he had long been considered the accepted candidate for Erskales' position, no thought of personal reward had entered my mind. I can assure you, without promise of reward, that the moment that I receive advices to do so, I shall take Baleria and surround Deioces' palace to protect it from vandalism. I have arms for more than two thousand men. You may so inform Cyaxares." There seemed no doubt of his sincerity.

"I know that Cyaxares sincerely trusts in you, Cracillies. There is more hypocrisy, false pretense, and betrayal in politics than in any other calling, therefore absolute confidence is a rare jewel. I bring that jewel

to you from our future sovereign. Let us treasure it."

The priest bowed his head in response.

"I will now give you another surprise." Then lifting the cover, he asked, "What do you think of that loot?"

"Why, what is this?" exclaimed Cracillies, in greater excitement than he had yet displayed.

Cambyses related the facts.

"And Saranaces and Claudies, where are they?"

"They are there. Each is ignorant of the other's capture. I have not had time to question them. You shall have the pleasure of listening. Conceal yourself there," and Cambyses ordered Saranaces brought before him.

The prisoner was sullen and ugly, but, upon beholding before him the terrible Cambyses, he palpably weakened. He had expected to see Erskales as his captor.

Exhibiting the riding-habit and boots, Cambyses demanded to know the meaning of them.

This seemed so trivial to Saranaces that his courage returned.

"And is this sufficient cause for your making me a prisoner, and subjecting me to all the tortures that you have?" he asked, with a fine scorn.

Ignoring this reply, Cambyses asked,

"Who was your companion previous to your detention last night?"

"A palace servant, in my confidence. I had him bring to me Saluciea's riding-habit to make it appear that she had fled the city with Erskales. For she is gone. He could not bring them all at one time, and he returned to bring Saluciea's treasure box."

A feeling of horror went through Cambyses as he

realized that this fiend was using his dead sister for the advancement of his own political fortunes. He had found her dead, and had not guessed the truth. Concealing her, he now sought to profit by her absence from the palace; this was his conclusion.

“Erskales! Would he himself not refute this?”

Saranaces was either trapped, or else was doing some remarkably clear thinking, when he coolly replied:

“After Cyaxares had taken his departure, Erskales openly declared to me that he believed the priests of Crail had aided Cyaxares in the abduction of Paulius, demanding the right to search the caverns. Feeling certain that he was acting solely upon his own initiative, hoping to fasten suspicion upon me, I instructed him to send trusted persons to make the search. He himself with three priests came to the grotto, and I felt it was for the good of our cause to detain him, and he is now a prisoner in the labyrinth. Had I permitted him to escape he surely would have betrayed us to Deioces.”

“Does Cracillies know of Erskales’ presence in the labyrinth?”

“As much as I dislike to say it, I deem it wise to keep as much from Cracillies as possible. I believe him to be a traitor, and while he is not actually under restraint, I have taken the responsibility of preventing his leaving the caverns, being fearful of betrayal at his hands,” bravely declared the priest, evidently believing that he was on safe grounds.

Cambyses could hardly suppress a laugh.

“You ordered Cracillies detained?” asked Cambyses, simulating great surprise.

“Yes.”

“What reason had you for believing him disloyal to us?”

“I found him in secret communication with the palace.”

“Who was his accomplice?”

“Claudies, son of Astyages.”

“Do you know this Claudies?”

“No, I have never seen him but once, when he was pointed out to me as Cracillies’ accomplice. I have at court a confidential servant who knows all that transpires there. He informed me that Cracillies was preparing to have Saluciea flee with Scala. Having Erskales secure, I decided to place the blame upon him as an excuse for his disappearance. This was my reason for securing her riding outfit and treasure box,” and he looked earnestly at Cambyses.

“Then you did secure her treasure box?”

“No, my servant had returned for it when I was abducted. I presume he has it secreted, and is now greatly alarmed and puzzled about my disappearance.”

“Saluciea — where is she?”

“She is in seclusion. I do not care to say where.”

“And Scala?”

“I suspect that Cracillies has her concealed somewhere. She has disappeared.”

The straightforwardness and plausibility of this confession astonished Cambyses, and had he not been in possession of indisputable evidence of Saranaces’ perfidy, he would surely have been puzzled.

“You deny positively that you are disloyal to the cause of Cyaxares?” said Cambyses.

“With all my heart; I have never been so deeply outraged. I was the friend of Cyaxares’ father, and

I cannot believe that his son would sanction this insult to me."

Cambyses laughed, then roared:

"Cyaxares knows nothing of this, else your head would not now be upon your shoulders, Saranaces. You are the most despicable, yet plausible, scoundrel that ever breathed. Look here!" and Cambyses uncovered Salucia's treasure box.

"Well?" demanded Saranaces, hoping against hope.

"Well!" thundered Cambyses, "what about this damnable message to Astyages?"

Saranaces had played his game to the end. He was now ready to drop to the earth.

"Take him away," commanded Cambyses.

When he was out of sight and hearing, Cambyses ordered Claudies brought to him.

Claudies was brought forward, and, believing that he alone was a prisoner, made a clean breast of it.

The plot was Saranaces'. Scala and Claudies were to flee the country. Salucia had disappeared, and Saranaces was to circulate the story that she had fled with Erskales. He would at once become head of the Holy State. He would dispose of Cracillies, assume power over the priests of Crail, and incite war and revolution with the view of declaring himself dictator, should the opportunity present itself. He would court the friendship of Astyages, and the Sapor by returning the young princesses.

Claudies declared the alleged letter by Erskales was a forgery written by him at the dictation of Saranaces. He admitted that he was concealed in the house in Baleria, and had overheard a quarrel between Cracillies and Saranaces, in which the former openly accused the latter of disloyalty. Saranaces demanded

to know at once where Cracillies had concealed Saluciea.

Claudies had been acting as a courier between the palace and the Holy State, therefore knew much about Deioces' plans, which he frankly revealed. Deioces had confessed to Saranaces, and the latter had advised the king to declare war against Astyages at once, for many causes, in order to anticipate Astyages, and to alleviate the disgrace of the grave charges that the latter would bring against him.

Deioces would take the field within the month.

Evidently Saranaces had concealed from Claudies the truth regarding Saluciea, for he was totally ignorant of the tragic occurrence in the house, and knew nothing of her present location. He assumed that Saranaces, in the furtherance of his plot, had spirited her away.

That was sufficient; Cambyses had Claudies again concealed, while he confronted Saranaces with Cracillies. The latter was almost overcome with sorrow when he saw the humiliation of his once trusted colleague. But not so with Saranaces. He cursed and raved at his unfortunate predicament.

It was decided to confine closely the two prisoners within the caverns. Cracillies was also to take charge of the treasure casket, and to conceal it until a suitable disposition of it could be made. Candes with two guards accompanied Cracillies, taking the casket and Saranaces with them.

Cambyses was about to instruct other guards to follow, when a cry arose, and Claudies was seen fleeing down the mountain trail toward Baleria, with the guards tumbling over one another to overtake him. They sent a shower of stones after him, twice bringing him down. Each time, however, he staggered to

his feet and kept going, and it was plain to be seen that he had escaped. Cambyses roared in impotent rage when the last guard returned without him.

Sending word in to Cracillies of the disaster, and to instruct the guards to follow, he and his men made all haste to leave the dangerous locality, not knowing what Claudies might be able to bring upon them, should they remain there.

At the frontier Cambyses established a perfect system of signal corps stations, extending almost to Derbend pass, in order to keep in touch with the events that would follow Cyaxares' visit to the Holy Crater. Cracillies in the meantime was carefully agitating Baleria, and carrying out a plan of vexing Deioeces into an active campaign against Astyages.

CHAPTER IX

CYAXARES AT THE COURT OF THE SAPOR

AS he journeyed toward the Holy Crater Cyaxares pondered over his coming trials. This was no child's play, this seeking to incite to war the great mystery of Asia, the Sapor, King of Kings, and ruler over an hundred million people. Ordinary kings of that period were eccentric and arbitrary, doing unexpected and inconsistent things on the impulse of the moment. What might be expected of a ruler of whom the world knew so little? He himself was known to be without country, and without reputation or fame. As an advocate of the restoration of his father to his throne, he could be thought an adventurer, aside from his now being an ambassador of Astyages. He must depend wholly upon his native wit, and upon the seriousness of the message that he brought to the Sapor.

It had been said that no ambassador had been permitted to look upon the sacred person of the Sapor in half a century, therefore his curiosity arose as he neared the frontier of the Holy Crater, as indicated by more frequent signs of travelers. Coming to a wide, green plateau, upon which were seen grazing numerous domestic animals, sleepy and lazy from plentiful feeding, it was decided to stop there for the night, a party to be sent forward to reconnoiter the country into which they were entering.

Dismounting, they permitted their jaded animals to lave their panting sides in the cooling mountain stream,

then picketed them to partake of the succulent grass of the meadow. Spreading their tents they ate their own frugal meal, and were soon wrapped in restful slumber.

Even before they had breakfasted the next morning a large body of splendidly accoutered horsemen, accompanied by the men that they had sent forward, rode to their camp.

They were dark, heavily bearded, and excessively large men, all as large as Cyaxares himself. They were armed cap-a-pie, and their horses were covered with blankets of dull mail. They carried long spears, oval shields, and short swords.

After proper salutations, their leader joined Cyaxares in his tent, where they breakfasted together. The chieftain informed Cyaxares that he would escort him and his party to the Holy Crater.

Within the hour they were on their way, the chieftain, Cyaxares, and the special official from Astyages' court riding in advance of the main body. They came to a high promontory, overlooking a wide valley, covered with cultivated fields. Here and there could be seen men and animals moving. Streams of clear mountain water wound about, watering the lands, which were regularly and tastefully separated into tracts. The vineyards and orchards even encroached upon the lower mountain sides and foot-hills.

Cyaxares suitably expressed his admiration of the appearance of the country as they passed along the crest, comparing it with a bird's-eye view of the plains of Little Ironia. This was on a much grander scale and of a more definite form, being surrounded by a circle of grayish mountains with the inner edge as clean-cut as a wedding ring. Directly in the center

of the valley was a clear lake of water of goodly dimensions.

"The Holy Crater?" asked Cyaxares.

"No," smilingly replied the chief. "This is the land of the Naobians. There are sixty of these snug valleys surrounding the Holy Crater."

Higher and higher they climbed up the mountain until the great valley below became but undulating waves of green. A quick turn brought them out upon a narrow, rocky plateau, barely large enough to accommodate the whole body of mounted men.

There was a very noticeable change in the character of the surrounding mountain walls. There was an aspect of artificiality, which at first was puzzling, but upon close inspection it was seen that its whole face was a series of artificially constructed terraces and galleries, doubtless intended for purposes of protection in time of warfare.

"We must dismount here, we can go no farther upon our horses. They and your men will be well and comfortably provided for. You and your companion alone may accompany me," said the chieftain.

Traversing a queerly constructed road for some distance, they approached the face of the cliff and climbed a steep, narrow stairway, cut in the solid stone, upwards for an hundred feet to a stone platform.

Four stalwart guards challenged the party here. After a brief parley a tremendous stone was turned upon a pivot, and a passageway was opened for them to pass into the mountain.

After the ponderous stone door had closed behind them, it seemed that they were in total darkness, but gradually the light of day became visible at the other end of the passage. The way spread out, fan-shaped,

as they advanced, and at intervals openings along the sides suggested other branches. What nature had done in the caverns of Crail seemed puny and crude compared with that which had here been wrought by the hand of man. Cyaxares was overawed by the sense of cold, impregnable strength as betrayed by these hand-hewn caves, and the inscrutable power over it all, as suggested by the automatic, emotionless challenges that met them from time to time. Strength and power, the growth of ages, were carved in every line. The hard, harsh voices of the guards, and the clank of their armor, seemed chained to the very granite walls. Against such power resistance seemed useless. Dead silence seemed to resent their presence there. A feeling of despondency came over Cyaxares, as they clanked their way through these ancient halls of mystery. What did the great beyond contain?

Emerging from the passage they were standing at the outer edge of a wide terrace looking down upon a beautiful garden, not unlike the gardens of Crail. A double gallery extended around the entire space, half of which was uncovered, while the other half was cut back under the walls, with many arched connections between the inner and outer spaces. With his knowledge of the habits of the priests of Crail, Cyaxares quickly conjectured that this was a similar home for the priests of the Holy Crater, the inner or protected gallery being for use in periods of inclement weather. The blue sky seemed to come down so close that it might almost be touched.

As they passed along the gallery, priests began to peer out at them from the arches. They were surprisingly like the priests of Crail in garb and stature, but where the former had smooth faces these men of

meditation wore beards, queerly platted in many little rope-like thongs, which almost covered their chests. This, with their great shock of hair, gave them an ancient appearance. Their faces were soft, kindly, and highly intelligent, yet, due doubtless to the infrequency of such events, they plainly betrayed eager curiosity regarding the strangers within their caves.

The gardens looked well cultivated, and tastefully arranged, the sweet fragrance of the flowers rising even to these galleries. The same deathlike silence prevailed.

By a series of graduated trails the party was finally conducted to the gardens below, where a number of very aged priests accosted them. It was made known that Cyaxares was an ambassador extraordinary, who had credentials to present to the high priest of the Holy Crater.

“Does the world without not know that the high priest of the Holy Crater is the Sapor?” asked the speaking priest.

“Of all the people in the world the person charging me to deliver this message has the best right personally to communicate with the Sapor. My instructions are for me to deliver the packet into the hands of the inner high priest, who will understand, and will immediately take me into the presence of the Sapor.”

At this speech by Cyaxares, all the priests raised their hands in unfeigned amazement, and shook their heads. Evidently this surprise was transmitted to the galleries above, for now the outer edge swarmed with the bearded priests, whispering and gesticulating.

It was very suggestive of that form of hysterical panic that seizes upon people whose even tenor of life is not often disturbed. The form that it would as-

sume in the end was uncertain, but they kept coming, and their voices could now be plainly heard below.

One of the elder priests looked up at the excited men in the gallery, raised his hand with the palm upward, and all sounds immediately ceased, and the priests gradually withdrew themselves from sight.

The party was now bidden to wait until some instructions could be had from within the Holy Crater. They were conducted to a comfortable resting-place, and wine and viands were placed before them, intimating that it would require some time.

The chief of guards explained that Cyaxares' mission was an unusual one, and the priests hardly knew how to proceed. It was because Cyaxares' first message came from the Holy Church in Ironia, and especially from its head, Cracillies, that he had been first conducted to the priests of the Holy Crater.

It was an hour before any word came. Then he alone was conducted to what appeared to be a smooth, blank wall. Slowly it receded, leaving a large square opening directly through the wall, which was about fifty feet in thickness. The effect was the most startling thing that Cyaxares had ever seen. He was looking into a new world beyond, a glorious picture surrounded by a rustic frame, the sides of the opening. The shimmer of a golden city, of palaces beyond description, momentarily blinded his eyes. Here, surely, was the secret of the Holy Crater; here was wealth unheard of in the outer world; why tempt the greed of nations by allowing the eyes of their ambassadors to feast upon it, then take back with them stories to whet the teeth of conquest and adventure? It was indeed a wise precaution. He was not permitted to ponder long. A powerful man of tremendous size,

accompanied on either side by guards with shining spears, lowered for action, stepped into the opening and motioned for him to enter. Without a word the great warrior turned about, and Cyaxares followed him down through a long line of grim soldiers clad in dead mail, half concealed behind huge shields, and with spears advanced.

Here were form and discipline such as Cyaxares had never witnessed before. It made his very flesh creep. He felt it would be a terrible thing to look into the face of the great, mysterious Sapor, whose mind inspired this unyielding formality. It had no human semblance. Brave man that he was, he for a moment had grave doubts, not unmingled with an unnameable fear, the fear that is in every man's heart, of the unknown, the mysterious. The Sapor had inspired the whole civilized world with this same fear. This very thought was inspiring. The hot blood came welling up into Cyaxares' cheeks. He too was born to be a king; he would not disgrace his inheritance. No, not even the King of Kings should inspire him with fear. He would face the Sapor as he had faced Deioces. He would pit his personality against that of any ruler and see if, after all, every man is not a king when his cause is righteous. He felt strong, erect, and as stolid and austere as the harshest soldier. It fitted him well, with these strange surroundings.

He was conducted along the inevitable hand-hewn gallery, which could be seen winding and twisting about the almost perpendicular walls that surrounded the Holy Crater. It needed no one to tell him that he was in the sacred precinct of the Sapor. His conductor never turned, and he heard the steady clank, clank of soldiers marching behind him, as they gradually de-

scended down an incline until they were barred by a high granite wall. The things that he had observed by cautious glances were almost fearful in their grandeur. Miles upon miles of this broad, even gallery traversed the steep sides of the crater. Every foot of the low safety wall, extending along its edges, was a gem of artistic carving. Untold quantities of flowers and blooming plants and shrubs beautified the way on both sides. A splendid view of palaces, ornately bedecked with gold and silver, and apparently wholly constructed of onyx, filled the crater, which was about one mile in diameter.

Huge bronze gates, inlaid with gold and silver, opened, and Cyaxares found himself transferred to the care of another military escort. Like men of stone the soldiers stood while the noble young ambassador was placed in a gorgeous palanquin, and lifted to the shoulders of strong Ethiopians to be carried in state to the palace of the Sapor. He was prepared for surprises and his fine, mobile countenance no longer betrayed the emotions raging within.

Before entering the holy city he had removed his heavy military cloak and stood bareheaded in his court dress of richly embroidered silk, by all odds the handsomest specimen of noble young manhood that any one there had ever seen. There was a marvelous contrast between his auburn curls and the jet black shocks and dark faces about him. All paid him deep respect in accord with his good appearance. From some mysterious source the word had been passed that this extraordinary man had something in common with their own great sovereign. This caused the highest dignitaries to show him marked deference.

Cyaxares could not judge of the external appear-

ance of the Sapor's palace because he was hurried into a covered passageway to emerge into an antechamber of greatest simplicity. The walls were of cold gray stone and the furnishings stiff, unsightly, and uncomfortable. Here he was waited upon by priests of the higher order, attached to the Sapor's household. They were all aged, wise-looking men.

"I am arch-arbiter of the Sapor's household," said the spokesman.

"I am Cyaxares, son of Phraortes, and ambassador extraordinary from Astyages, king of Persis. I also bear a message from Cracillies, head of the Holy Church of Ironia, and a most urgent, personal message from one in whom your sovereign has a close personal interest. Its confidential nature forbids my divulging its import until I have carried it as nearly directly to the great Sapor as your laws and customs will permit.

"I wish, first, to bring greetings from King Astyages, and from the Holy Church of Ironia, to the Church and State of the Holy Crater, and then crave the blessing of your sovereign."

"Well spoken," exclaimed the high pontiff. "Do these messages relate to one subject, or may some of them be discharged independently?"

"The most urgent, and the one upon which all the others have a direct bearing, is the confidential message to the Sapor," replied Cyaxares. "I prefer to hold a confidential audience with the Sapor's closest individual adviser before presenting the message, because of its extraordinary and important nature."

The priests held a whispered conference for a few moments, then the pontiff bade Cyaxares follow, and passed into a long, marble corridor that led to another wing of the palace. There were no intimations

of greater luxury than he had already seen, and he marveled at this simplicity, bordering upon poverty or stinginess, in the heart of a city built of gold. He had no time to ponder the mystery.

"A courteous bow is all that is required of you," said the priest, and he tapped a silver gong suspended by a cord from the ceiling.

A door slowly opened, and revealed a low, square room lighted by only a small silver lamp. An Ethiopian servant quickly lighted other lamps.

"Wotan," said the priest, and quickly withdrew. Cyaxares bowed low.

The man was swathed in silken garments of some singular construction to give him a fat, pudgy appearance. He was lying at full length upon a low divan made of luxurious pillows of richly embroidered stuff. The gondola-like ends of the divan seemed to be made of solid beaten gold, as was quite every other article of furniture in the room. From many unexpected places flashed gems of incalculable value. In the center of his forehead flashed an immense ruby attached to his head by a wide band of colored silk.

He exhibited no emotion when Cyaxares was presented. He did not offer him any of the comforts of the room. He merely lay with his body propped by his arm, and calmly surveyed the young man from head to foot. At a single movement of his head, the Ethiopian knelt at his side. In some unknown jargon he made known his desires. The servant brought a silver tray, and, kneeling before Cyaxares, extended it toward him. As eloquent as words this act requested him to present his credentials to Wotan.

Cyaxares hesitated, and prepared to speak. The figure upon the divan instantly arose to a half-sitting

posture, fire flashed from his sunken eyes, and he fiercely pointed to the tray. Cyaxares calmly placed thereon the message that Madrilla had given him to deliver. The servant again knelt before Wotan, and presented the sealed message.

Wotan broke the seal, and began reading. In a moment his face blanched to a chalky whiteness. He dashed off the bejeweled headband, smote a gong that hung suspended near him, and instantly four stalwart Ethiopians ran into the room, picked up the divan as a litter, and awaited orders. Again he struck the gong, and they replaced the litter upon the floor, and left the room; he had changed his mind. The servant again presented the tray, and Cyaxares placed thereon the messages from Cracillies and from Astyages. He seemed to be playing for time.

Wotan was satisfied. He had hesitated to accredit Cyaxares, but he was now convinced of the grave importance of the messages. His whole demeanor changed. A gray pallor had settled upon his face as if he anticipated some great sorrow or calamity.

At a motion the servant placed a pillow beneath him, and gradually raised him to a sitting position, propping him securely. Cyaxares saw that he was a paralytic.

The servant then summoned a sage-looking priest from an adjoining room, who bowed to Cyaxares as he entered, but showed little reverence for Wotan. He looked closely at his eyes, then felt his hands. Dropping a powder into a glass of wine, he held it to his lips until he had swallowed it. A fit of palsy had suddenly rendered him perfectly helpless.

In a few moments he recovered the use of his hands sufficiently to gather up the parchments, then he again

struck the gong. Again the slaves appeared, lifted the litter, and awaited orders.

Motioning Cyaxares to his side, he took his hand and gave signs that the slaves understood. A door was opened, and, clinging to Cyaxares' hand, Wotan was carried into the great tomblike audience chamber of the Sapor.

"Bow down to the great King of Kings," said a deep voice from some hidden part of the room.

There it sat, a huge stone image. Wotan pointed to it, and conveyed to Cyaxares that he must pay homage to it. And Cyaxares, still wondering, bent his knee to the king of stone.

In bewilderment he looked at Wotan as the only source of an explanation. There was a rustling, cracking sound, and the stone image rolled away, and a horrifying sight met his gaze. Wotan found his voice, and uttered the only words that he could speak, "The Sapor."

He pressed Cyaxares forward toward the horrible creature, and the slaves withdrew from the room with the litter.

Cyaxares was alone with the Sapor.

What was it? It was made of parchment. It sat blinking at him with its inhuman eyes. Yet it was, or had been, human in its time. The parchmentlike skin glistened over the bones of the forehead and cheeks. The lips had ceased to close over fanglike teeth. During the years that it had sat in a great chair of solid ivory, its fingers, with long clawlike nails, had worn away the ends of the arms of the chair with their constant tapping. The same was true of the footboard, where could be seen two gnarled and twisted feet with their long claws constantly digging at

the ivory. A simple, well-worn purple gown, without ornamentation of any kind, was its only garment.

On either side of the throne lay a great vicious dog with hair like straw and with mane bristling like wire. Their fangs were constantly shown in a snarl of ready anger. They were held by chains attached to heavy copper collars and passed through rings in the floors. The chains were then held by two enormous Ethiopian slaves, as black as night; their bodies were wholly nude.

Cyaxares was so overcome at this unexpected sight that he had no thought of the courtesies due a sovereign, but stood spellbound and gazing at the awful being. But, if he thought this death's head was speechless and without intelligence, he was quickly undeceived.

"I am the Sapor!" and it shook the long, whiplike hair that fell over its shoulders. The voice was unmistakably that of a woman, and carried a wonderful resonance that filled the room.

Instinctively Cyaxares advanced a pace, and bent his knee to the Sapor.

"Make known your mission," said the Sapor, and the blinking, starlike eyes flashed.

He held in his hands the messages that Wotan had handed back to him upon leaving the room.

"I have here a confidential message, the contents of which I do not know. I was bidden to bring it here and deliver it into the hands of the inner high priest, who would present it to your Majesty. Shall I give it you?"

"Yes. No! Read it."

Cyaxares advanced toward the ivory throne, unfolded Madrilla's message, and began reading it:

"Unto my royal mother I send greetings and affection.

“This message will be presented by a nobleman, Prince Cyaxares, son of Phraortes. To him I owe my life and present safety. Trust him as I do—”

The Sapor had arisen, and was standing upon the foot-board of her ivory chair, eagerly, wildly leaning forward to listen.

“Go on!” she screamed, her face distorted with passion.

“The escort that was to meet me did not come. Our train was captured by bandits, and we were held prisoners. I have learned that Deioces, king of Ironia, purchased me and Almareta, daughter of King Astyages, and had us brought to Baleria. Prince Cyaxares rescued us from Deioces’ palace, and conveyed us to the caverns of Crail, and we are prisoners, but with friends. We cannot safely be taken away from Crail. Entrust to Prince Cyaxares our rescue. Grant him soldiers for our safe escort, as you love me, my royal mother. He will bear credentials from Cracillies, head of the Holy Church of Ironia, also from King Astyages, of Persis.

“Again I send you love and affectionate greetings.

“MADRILLA.”

A loud scream resounded throughout the room, and then she called:

“Wotan! Wotan!”

Snatching a stick off a small table she struck a large gong, again and again screaming: “Wotan! Wotan!”

The very walls seemed to open, and the room was filled with soldiers, with their spears presented in a circle about Cyaxares. The two great dogs were tugging and straining at their chains and baying uproariously. It was a terrible moment for Cyaxares.

“Go away! I want Wotan. Where is Wotan?” and she waved the soldiers back, and they disappeared from the room. “Zirkan, where is Wotan?” she demanded of a dignified, priestly individual who had entered the room.

Zirkan made obeisance, and replied,

“Your Majesty, Wotan is dead, having passed away but a few moments ago.”

“Coward. He knew his fate. Call a council at once. I shall wait here.”

Zirkan bowed himself out of the room.

“Come here. I want to place my hands upon you.”

Cyaxares stepped forward, and attempted to bend his knee to the Sapor, but she cried, “Arise.”

She stood upon the foot-board, placed her parchment claws upon his arms, then stroked his curls and mumbled incoherently.

Suddenly she exclaimed:

“You are a man. I will give my kingdom for Madrilla’s safe return to me,” and she lay in a dejected heap in her well-clawed ivory chair, with tears falling over her thin yellow cheeks.

“May I speak, your Majesty?” asked Cyaxares.

“Yes.”

“Then let me implore of you the honor of bringing back to you your beloved daughter, without promise of reward. I pledge my life to restore her to you in safety.”

“I believe you, but wait.” She was calm.

Zirkan entered accompanied by twelve men, one bearing a huge law-book.

Then the Sapor spake:

“Wotan is dead. Zirkan is high priest of war. Record it and obey his commands. Zirkan, put under

arms an army. We will call a Holy War against Deioces. Call a war council. Go! Remain here, Zirkan, and you," pointing to Cyaxares.

In less than twenty minutes Cyaxares' breath was taken away by the elder priest reëntering the room, making obeisance, and announcing that one hundred thousand soldiers were under arms, and awaiting orders.

Here was lightning preparation for war with a vengeance. Cyaxares at once perceived that he had pulled the world down upon himself unless he could have a voice in the council.

The great stone image, like a live thing, silently drew back into its place, and the Sapor disappeared from view.

Twelve men came slowly into the room while two giant Ethiopian slaves brought in, and placed upon a stone table, a huge volume of manuscript.

Zirkan waved one of the men to a seat at his left, and bade Cyaxares take a seat near his right.

After some mysterious rites, Cyaxares was bidden to make known all the facts, which he did, only reserving such parts as he thought might be detrimental to his plans. Then in eloquent terms he said:

"I plead for further hearing that I may make plain to the powers of the Holy Crater the sole and only responsibility for this outrage. The Holy Church in the three signatories of the triple alliance are a unit in the desire for universal peace; Astyages is not only friendly with the Holy State of the Sapor, but is an equal victim in this horrid affair; the priests of Crail are wholly in accord with the priests of the Holy Crater; all the surrounding countries are friendly to, and enjoying with, Persis a period of great prosperity, and consequent progression and national happiness. The

agrarians of Ironia are living in constant fear, and are driven as abject slaves. The people of the city of Baleria are irresponsible, and in no wise associated with this vile conduct on the part of Deioces.

“Therefore, Deioces alone must be punished. The destruction of his army of thirty thousand soldiers should be the ultimate and only purpose of your war plans. All others are innocent and are friendly to the Holy Crater.

“Deioces’ army will be upon the plains in front of the city of Aspahan by the time an avenging army from the Holy Crater can reach there. Then, I pray you, send only a sufficient army to annihilate Deioces, and do it so quickly that the people at large will not be aroused and shocked into the belief that a general holy war is upon them. I shall make known to your high priest of war other matters of importance.”

At this juncture the stranger at the left of Zirkan made known a desire to speak. Cyaxares deferentially gave way to him.

He was a young man, well dressed, but soiled by travel. His shifting eyes and cunning aspect forewarned Cyaxares of some unexpected danger. He was not of the Holy Crater, yet he was permitted to enter into this council, or at least was here to be heard.

Bending a keen, sarcastic look upon Cyaxares, he said:

“And who is this man that thus eloquently slanders the great founder of the triple alliance? — None other than the pretender to Deioces’ throne. By what authority does he come here as a representative of Astyages? Custom has made it a law, and the triple alliance specifically declares, that a man to speak for a state or ruler, as special envoy, must be a legal subject

of that ruler. This man is a subject of no ruler, a citizen of no country, and owes allegiance to no king; then why is he here?"

Cyaxares was so astounded that he was much confused. The man was a perfect stranger to him, he did not know his mission, and could not guess what complications might arise from the prejudice that he had so adroitly thrown in his way. Arising in anger, he exclaimed: "My credentials are in the hands of the powers here. Who are you that you thus boldly challenge my motives?"

"I am a special ambassador from Deioces, king of Ironia, and I am here to prove that you are a wily impostor, and only desire to inspire war for your own personal ends; that your story is a myth; that Deioces knows absolutely nothing of the daughters of the Sapor and Astyages; that you now have these young princesses hidden away somewhere until you can consummate your cunning scheme," was the insolent reply.

A light had come to Cyaxares, who was now so thoroughly aroused that, had he not been fearful of the consequences, he would have throttled the scoundrel on the spot. Looking calmly into the face of the man, he said:

"Were I not bound by the respect that I owe to this august conclave, I would throttle you till I purged you of the true intents and purposes of your visit here, and then I would pull your lying tongue from your hypocritical throat. You are not an ambassador from Deioces. You are the spy and associate of Saranaces, who is my prisoner. I myself received the daughter of the Sapor and the daughter of Astyages from Deioces, in his own palace. They are now the wards of the Holy Church, and directly in the care of Cracillies, the

head of the Holy Church. I am here primarily to speak for the Holy Church, from which I am provided with credentials. There are my credentials in the hands of the high priest. Do you challenge the Holy Church of Ironia?"

"By what test do your credentials prove their authenticity?" demanded the stranger.

"By the same test that proves you to be a base counterfeit, a comparison of our credentials with the accredited signatures and seals of the powers that we claim to represent." Then, turning to Zirkan, he said, "Have your keeper of seals bring the seals of Deioces, Saranaces, and Cracillies?"

At a sign one of the priests arose, passed out of the room, and soon returned with a large volume of parchments.

The stranger was plainly disturbed, but remained quiet.

A long and careful examination was made, and they all finally seemed to agree upon some essential point. A gong was hanging near the table and Zirkan struck it three sharp blows. A file of soldiers entered. Pointing to the now frightened stranger, the high priest said,

"Place him under restraint until I send for him." Then, turning to Cyaxares, he smilingly asked, "Did you ever see this man before?"

"Not to my recollection," responded Cyaxares.

"It is the wayward son of Astyages, Claudies. He was found almost exhausted from hard riding, night and day, in an effort to anticipate you here. Word comes from Cambyses warning you of his coming, also of the re-capture of Saranaces, who had escaped from the caverns. We must inform you that we are fully in touch with the priests of Crail, therefore we know

that you may be trusted. You were quite correct in believing that he represented Saranaces. We had your companion secretly identify him as the son of Astyages, then he was brought blindfolded to the chamber from the outer gardens."

And then they counseled with one another regarding the proposed war against Deioces, Cyaxares' wishes being deferred to in the matter of limiting action to the punishment of Deioces.

He would be provided with a picked army of five thousand soldiers for the purpose of taking Ironia.

With all matters settled, Zirkan gave his final instructions to review an army of sixty thousand soldiers on the following day. Then he took possession of Cyaxares as his special guest, giving him all the attention possible. But no mention of a successor to Deioces was broached.

"This night I will be sponsor for you in the Holy City, the city in which alone dwell the chieftains of all the clans of the Holy Crater. You will then understand why its gates are locked against the world. Go and rest until I call you, for to-morrow we must review our armies," and the newly appointed high priest of war led Cyaxares to a nearby chamber, where he found ample luxuries and willing slaves.

CHAPTER X

THE CITY OF KINGS

CYAXARES was weary from the mental strain and anxiety of the past few hours, and was glad to be alone for a while. After partaking of the tempting refreshments placed before him, he lay down upon a luxurious couch to rest and think. He immediately fell asleep and dreamed that Madrilla, fair and beautiful, sat upon the throne, and he was kneeling before her. She had bidden him arise, and sit by her side, and he was serenely happy. How long he had slept he could not tell, but he awoke in total darkness. What should he do? He clapped his hands, and instantly two slaves entered carrying trays containing many silver lamps, which they distributed about the room. Then others came, bearing ewers filled with water, basin, and soft towels for bathing. These were removed and Zirkan entered, and a small table containing viands served for two was brought.

“You were weary, and I did not disturb you. You will join me in this evening repast, and then I will reveal to you one of the greatest secrets in all the world, the Sapor’s method of summoning an army of a million soldiers in one hour,” said the priest, who was a kind, gentle-natured man. Cyaxares found him extremely intellectual and most companionable. It did not require long to dispose of the refreshments, Cyaxares being informed that they would later partake of other feasts in many palaces that they would visit.

After making some necessary changes in his attire, the young prince was surprised to have Zirkan present to him, with the compliments of the Sapor, a bandeau of pure gold, in the center of which was a resplendent sapphire of great beauty and incalculable value. This held his curling locks close about his head, and gave him a most distinguished and noble appearance. None could vie with Cyaxares in the matter of good looks. Clad in splendid silken garments beautifully embroidered in gold and silver interwrought with bright colors; shod in buskins of filigreed silver, and now wearing the magnificent tiara presented to him by the Sapor, he looked every inch a king. They were ready to pass out into the city of gold, silver, and precious gems. Zirkan very frankly expressed his admiration for his companion of the evening's excursion.

The soft notes of a distant gong sounded, and Zirkan at once arose, saying:

“It is the will of her Majesty, the queen, that we present ourselves before her. Come.”

Four tremendous nude Ethiopians stood ready, with staffs, upon the top of which were silver flambeaux. These lighted the way through intricate and uninteresting halls, cut through the solid, native rock.

Again they entered the audience chamber where reigned the stolid king of stone, bending their knees in token of respect to the image of him who once ruled as King of Kings. Zirkan whispered to Cyaxares:

“The world at large believes that he still lives and reigns. Only the immediate household of the present queen ever looks upon her face. The kings over whom she rules know that it is death to breathe the secret, therefore speak not of it yourself.”

Instead of the image's being again pushed aside, a

panel in the wall opened, and they entered a small, dimly lighted reception room, the torch-bearing slaves remaining without. Here they were met by a distinguished-looking and aged priest, who held in his hand a white cross in the center of which was a circle of red. He greeted them cordially and quite informally. The cross was attached to a golden chain, which the priest now placed about Cyaxares' neck, saying:

"The noble stranger, Prince Cyaxares, is thrice welcome to the inner circles of the holy city. It is the custom to swear to secrecy all that enter here. Do you solemnly swear before your recognized gods that you will keep secret all that you sense within the sacred walls of this holy city, until you are released from this oath by order of the Sapor?"

"I do," replied Cyaxares.

"Then wear this cross, which is your safe passport among kings."

Cyaxares obeyed, and they were conducted to the private audience chamber of the queen. It was now too late for him to inquire of Zirkan why he now spake of the queen instead of the Sapor.

What was this new surprise? Surely it was all a play, to mystify and mislead him. Instead of the parchment being that he had seen upon the ivory throne earlier in the day, he was now presented to a magnificent woman, of wonderful personal attractiveness and commanding appearance, who was called the queen. Seated upon a throne of beaten gold incrustated with jewels, and surrounded by many beautiful young women, it was a scene of enchantment to bewilder the young prince. A low seat of polished ivory, decorated and upholstered with embroidered silks, was directly in front of the queen. Zirkan whispered that he must

kneel upon this in being presented to the sovereign.

A murmur of admiration and surprise was heard upon their making their appearance, and the queen was so moved that she eagerly leaned forward to greet the noble stranger, whose bearing was so stately and dignified and whose manly graces were so manifest. Two elegantly attired esquires accompanied him, one on either side, as he approached the queen. Kneeling, he bowed his head, and his great mass of auburn curls fell about his splendid shoulders.

The queen reached forth a slender wand, and touched Cyaxares upon the head, saying:

“Arise, Cyaxares, you are thrice welcome to the holy city. You are indeed fit to associate with kings.” Then at a wave of her wand, the attendants, all but the two esquires at the entrance and Zirkan, retired from the chamber. Cyaxares was bidden to take a seat at her right hand, and Zirkan upon her left. Her frank, friendly face at once removed all embarrassment.

Leaning eagerly toward Cyaxares, she said: “And now tell me about my Madrilla. I know your experience here is puzzling to you, but that will all be properly explained. I am the true Sapor although I am called queen, and Madrilla is my own daughter. Lay aside formality, and feel at your ease. The Sapor is not so terrible as the world believes.”

Cyaxares' frank eyes acknowledged this; she was a splendidly preserved woman of fifty, and still retained the grace and beauty of youth. There was no doubt in Cyaxares' mind that she was truly the mother of Madrilla, having the same features, the same voice, and the same friendly, confiding, and winsome manners, the same brown tresses and tender blue eyes.

“The fair Princess Madrilla is the image of her queenly mother, your Majesty,” he said.

“I have not seen her for ten years. She was returning from a sojourn in foreign lands, where she was being educated by the orders of her kingly father,” she said, softly, and tears were in her eyes. There was sadness as well as pathos in her voice. Cyaxares told her the story briefly but accurately, and again he made an eloquent plea, as he had done to the parchment mystery, to be given the honor of restoring to the Sapor her daughter. He was eloquent, strong, resourceful, and splendid in his argument and appeal. The fires of enthusiasm and admiration came into the eyes of the queen; her cheeks were aglow, and her bosom heaved with emotional excitement.

Cyaxares had more than won his cause, he had won the queen. A greater calamity than a holy war had befallen him.

For a moment she sat silently contemplating the splendid young stranger, and then, as if having fixed in her mind some strong resolution, she said,

“Cyaxares, I will grant your prayer on one condition, and that is that you must take an oath not to attempt to win the love of my daughter.”

A look of horror came into the face of Zirkan, which was met with a shade of disapproval in the gaze of the queen.

Cyaxares instinctively felt that he was unconsciously being drawn into some unknown and mysterious danger, nevertheless he made a manful resolve to be honorable with the queen mother, who surely had the right to make this request without making explanation, therefore he replied, apparently to the great relief of Zirkan:

“Your Majesty, it would be unbecoming an honorable gentleman to aspire to so high an honor without first praying to you for that rare privilege. As a duty, no matter how great the sacrifice, I must defer to your wishes in this matter; but neither sovereign nor God can command the human emotions to the extent that they may say, ‘Thou shalt not love,’ and expect obedience. I confess, without reserve, that to see and know Madrilla is to love her; this no human power can prevent.”

A sad, far-away look came into the beautiful eyes, a wistful look, as though pleading with some hidden power to restore to her a lost affection. With a half sob she aroused herself, and, in her kind, gently modulated voice, said:

“Yes, Cyaxares, you shall bring Madrilla to me. Go now. Zirkan will show you the wonders of the holy city this night, but to-morrow you will be by my side to review the gathering of the clans,” and she held forth her beautiful soft hand, which Cyaxares raised to his lips with a whispered thanks for all her generosity. Again she sighed deeply.

They were quickly conducted to a wide, flower-adorned balcony on the outer walls of the palace, and toward the city of golden palaces. Cyaxares was amazed, but Zirkan checked his exclamation of surprise by saying: “I cannot refrain from warning you of a very grave danger, Cyaxares, only to put you on your guard. It is my duty to guide you safely through your mission here, and prevent your becoming entangled in complications that might seriously affect the outcome of your visit. I, of course, am aware of your high and commendable desire to restore your father, which means yourself, to the throne that Deioces now

holds. The powers of the Holy Crater are in sympathy with you. This you will learn to-night by the overwhelming favors that the kings of the clans will shower upon you upon learning your identity. But not one of these kings has ever had audience with the queen, the mother of Madrilla, their reception at court not extending beyond the acting Sapor, who is mother to the queen."

"Mother to Madrilla's mother!" exclaimed Cyaxares.

"Yes, and these kings know this, and they also know all the strange circumstances surrounding this mystery. They know that at the death of the grandmother Madrilla instead of her mother will become the Sapor, provided she marries a prince of the blood. Until she does marry her mother will be acting Sapor. . . . It is essential for me to explain at this point, that the King of Kings, whose image stands in the outer audience chamber, put his queen, Madrilla's mother, away from him, because of the extreme love of them both for the beautiful child. They accused each other of monopolizing her affections, and, in a violent quarrel, the king placed the mother under restraint, and never permitted her to see her daughter thereafter. At the age of twelve the Sapor secretly intrusted the daughter to Nabonassor, king of Babylon, to broaden her education and to fit her to be Sapor instead of her mother. Before his death the king legally made the grandmother acting sovereign until Madrilla should be twenty-two, which she now is, at which age she was to be recalled, and her mother was to reign until Madrilla weds, when her husband shall be declared King of Kings, and shall be the Sapor over all the clans of the Holy Crater. You will un-

derstand, therefore, that those kings and princes that are unmarried secretly aspire to the hand of Madrilla. You will see many jealous and questioning eyes upon you this night. They know nothing of the plight of Madrilla, and the part that it plays in this enterprise. Word has been passed to them that you have sought the aid of the Sapor in an attempt to recover the throne of your father, and they are eager to take up arms in your cause."

"Then that was the queen's reason for swearing me not to attempt to win Madrilla's affections?"

"No; the horrifying thing is that she wants you for herself, and I foresee that the mother and daughter will again be divided because of mutual affection for one object. Of course you could not foresee such a calamity, therefore are not to blame for it. We must work together to avert a disastrous result. We must not permit a thought of it to mar the pleasure of this night. It is equally important that you show no especial affection for any one of the many beautiful women that you meet to-night. They are the wives, daughters, and sisters of the kings, and many of them will have designs upon you. The Sapor must not learn that you are unduly attracted to any one of them. She is a jealous queen."

"You forget that the council is aware of Madrilla's plight. Will not some one secretly give this out to the kings?" asked Cyaxares.

"No, they hold no communication with any one outside the palace," was the reply.

"There! Look! The first signal! Not before in thirty years has that great red cross been illuminated. It is the sign of a holy war. See! The first response, another, and still another," and a circle of answering

lights sprang into life. As far as the eye could discern them, they twinkled forth, until it looked as if the stars of heaven had come down to be numbered among the hosts of the Holy Crater. It was an awe-inspiring sight, and Cyaxares pondered well over the slumbering powers of this strange confederation as it slowly uncoiled to respond to the battle cry of the Church. Its mysterious origin was beyond the ken of man. It had existed centuries before other known nations were born. It had remained unshaken during all the period that the world had had any knowledge of it. The world only knew that at certain periods a fanatical host of untold numbers swept down from the great highlands of Central Asia, and devastated the balance of the earth. It did not always know the ulterior cause for war, hence the belief grew that these wars were not just. But all kings knew the just causes.

Cyaxares shuddered to see the quick response and the ever preparedness for war, and war with them meant destruction on a tremendous scale.

Zirkan admitted that he himself did not know even the number of clans, and the only manner by which an estimate of the number of soldiers could be made was to count the lights. Each light responding had under arms one thousand soldiers for the first call. Signals would be made designating which clans should first respond. To-morrow sixty clans would each send an army of one thousand men to be reviewed by their several kings, and secretly by the Sapor.

“Come, we must go down into the city. Cyaxares, you will see things this night that your civilization never dreamed of. Within this circle of lights is the Holy Crater. This city is the abiding place of the

kings that rule over the clans. Each king vies with the others in the rich decoration of his palace, drawing upon his clan for gold, silver, and precious jewels; hence the splendor and magnificence that you will behold. Each clan also vies with the others in keeping its king's palace provided with its rarest products. This friendly rivalry and competition is the mainspring of the confederation, and has made the people the proudest, most self-reliant, prosperous, and happy people in all the world, and this is the secret of the strong confederation. It is the satisfying of human necessity that cements them. . . . It is not yet known that I now bear the official title of the lord of war. My passport is of long standing. An official crier will precede us with a staff of authority, announcing the coming of visitors from the Sapor's palace."

Upon reaching a lower gallery a wide platform extended far out into the city. From this broad steps led down into the streets of the richest city that the world ever knew, a city in which dwelt only kings.

At the bottom of the onyx stair stood a line of trumpeters to herald their coming. These were led by an official bearing aloft a high staff, upon which was a white cross with a scarlet circle in its center.

At the first blast of the trumpets the palace portals began to open, and groups of gorgeously arrayed people came to look. There were aged kings with long snowy beards, young princes with blond curls and soft curling beards, and others with hair and skin as dark as night. The latter had sharp, glittering eyes, and looked fierce by the side of the blond men. Princesses of every age from toddling children to stately women stood in graceful groups, awaiting the coming of the favored stranger, who must be a king to be a guest of

the palace, and who must be a guest of the palace to be permitted the rare privilege of visiting the holy city.

On came the courier, crying,

“Cyaxares, a prince of the royal blood and honored guest of the Sapor, seeks entertainment in the holy city, the city of kings!” Then would follow a blare of trumpets.

This had an instantaneous effect upon the people. They rushed quickly within their palaces. Returning with flowers, fruits, wines, and musical instruments, they exclaimed:

“Thrice welcome to the holy city. Tarry with us and partake of our hospitality!”

This required them to stop a moment at each palace and to acknowledge the hospitable greetings, partaking at the same time of a sip of wine, or of some dainty fruit or sweetmeat. As they left each palace one member of the household, either a king or the eldest prince, dropped into line with them until quite a procession was formed. The street, for there was but one, was like a spiral with its outer end at the onyx stairway. It required fully two hours to pass the greater length of this street, and to arrive at a brilliantly lighted pavilion, where were gathered a large proportion of the populace watching games, listening to the music, eating, drinking, and making merry.

At the approach of the procession the performances ceased, and the people respectfully gathered in a circle to see what was happening.

It was a magnificent and brilliant scene. The kings, in stately and dignified procession, mounted a semi-circular dais, leaving three vacant seats in the midst of them, two of which were for Zirkan and Cyaxares. With a wave of his hand, one of them bade the revel-

ries to resume, and as if nothing extraordinary had occurred, the people proceeded with their joyous pastime.

One at a time the kings came, were formally presented to Cyaxares, occupied the extra seats for a few moments, and then made way for others, until all had cordially greeted him.

The exercises were extremely entertaining, consisting of dancing, wrestling, swimming, numerous feats of strength and agility, and some extraordinarily good vocal and instrumental music.

There was a lengthy pause to permit an orator to extol to the visiting stranger the merits and virtues of the confederation of the clans of the Holy Crater. This was by no means the least entertaining number on the program. He was a noble and intelligent young prince, from the land of Adhor, where dwelt the Adhorites.

Cyaxares had been finished in the schools of Babylon, during the astronomic period, under the reign of the learned and progressive Nabonassor. He well knew that none of these kings or princes was permitted to leave his country except in time of war. Therefore he was amazed at the profundity of their learning and development, and asked where the national seat of education was situated. He was informed that it was right there in the holy city. They had given to Babylon her mathematics and astronomy. They had given to quite every nation in Asia its code of laws, its knowledge of medicine, philosophy, and comparative science. This was done through a system of wandering priests sent out from the Holy Crater, or from the caverns of Crail.

Stepping forward, the splendid young orator delivered his address directly to Cyaxares, saying:

“Thrice welcome stranger, we greet you as brother and fellow-prince. You see about you the greatest kings of the earth, an inner clan of sovereigns, bound together by ties of blood as well as by sacred obligations of a covenant ratified so many centuries ago that the oldest king cannot tell the beginning.

“We are the original Aryans, the first people of civilization and learning. From our earliest time the world beyond received from us its first rudimentary lessons in mental development, and, like unto the foliage of a great tree, our influence has crept over the earth to shape the destinies of peoples and nations yet to be born. Even unto the far Eastern sea our principles of government have been adopted as a form of religion, and our country is called a mysterious heaven, with a city of golden streets, where all the people are happy. This mystifying belief will be taught to the generations of ages to come, and here beneath this city of golden streets is the antithesis of heaven, the fires of that hell that is now spoken of in the religious rites of Babylon and of other nations. This strange religion is not of our origin, we know of neither hell nor heaven. We know there is an Universal God, so great that his individuality is beyond the ken of mankind; yet he is a thinking, reasoning being, destroying old forms that he may construct new. We may recognize this universal being in the face of the living nature about us. The things that men do are so infinitesimally trivial that he cannot recognize them, therefore men have a certain relative freedom that enables them to assume imitative powers to create. Men associate themselves together for sundry purposes, and call themselves nations. They build for themselves aggregations of cavernous dwellings, grotesque

and gruesome, which they call cities. They erect large and ornate structures that they call houses or palaces for their gods. Not being able to conjure up a real God to sit within these palaces, they cast among themselves, and a man is chosen to represent God. Were it possible for the great God of the universe to take cognizance of this childish play, it would be blasphemous; as it is, it is a harmful imposition upon the native credulity and superstition of the great masses of the people, who have within them an instinctive reverence for nature as holding the breath and whisper of the real God — a creative being consisting of the whole. We, the Aryans, reverence that great God of nature, and live by our belief. We need not priests to teach us our religion, because it consists of a native piety taught to our people ages upon ages ago. We need not elaborate edifices, planned and erected under cruel edicts of foolish powers to sap the energies and substance of the people, in which to teach our religion, for the same piety is in every heart, and we best commune with our God when in the privacy and seclusion of our own homes. We need no censors nor tinsel church paraphernalia with which to frighten our spirits into absurd beliefs and an unreasonable fear of an invisible God. Our God does not inspire fear. Fear will not engender love nor respect for anything. Hatred and distrust are the fruits of a power based upon coercion and fear.

“Our great public edifices are placed where our people come for enlightenment and knowledge. Our priests are the meditative minds devoted to the advancement of learning. That our educational system has been seized upon and made a separate institution by designing persons, as an instrument of mental and

physical torture of the people for ulterior purposes, is no fault of ours. Our religion is still intact, and costs our people nothing. Our people cannot buy their way into a mysterious heaven, neither are they cast into a burning hell for revenge for not contributing toward the maintenance of hypocritical beings, claiming to be personal representatives of God.

“Our people are prosperous, contented, and happy, and always have been. As long as this is true it would be sinful for our feudal system to be destroyed.

“While we are called the mysterious clans of Asia, we are in intimate touch with the rulers of all nations. Inasmuch as all civilized nations are the offspring of the Aryan race, we assume a watchfulness over them, unsuspected by the world. From time to time it has been necessary for us to declare a holy war, and go down and punish certain nations for conduct contrary to the edicts of humanity. The advisers of the Holy Crater constitute the household of the Sapor. These include five hundred of the wisest men in all the world — the priests of the Holy Crater. We have no voice in matters pertaining to the outside world, but are wholly and willingly controlled by the Sapor. This city is impregnable. It is the permanent home of all the royal families of the confederation.

“Our great wealth and plenty extend to the hearthstones of the people throughout the breadth of the land. This is due to the fact that only sufficient products are exported to exchange for certain commodities that we cannot produce. This leaves all the products of the energy of our people as the great material wealth of the country. It requires no coercion, no burdensome taxation, no undue force, to induce the people to do their part toward maintaining this city of the

kings; we cannot utilize the thousandth part of the wealth offered in contribution in lieu of a direct tax. This shows the gratitude of a people for a government that has held them intact for many centuries.

“When the world begins to encroach upon us, or exhibit undue negligence in showing us respect for our antiquity and power, we chastise it, and it again remembers.

“While we are not fully informed regarding the facts, the Sapor’s having summoned an army for immediate service implies that you are the bearer of tidings that impress the Sapor with the necessity of warfare. You have been shown unusual courtesy in that you are permitted to visit the holy city. It reveals the confidence reposed in you by the Sapor, which also measures the very grave importance of your message. The Sapor’s wish is our law, hence our welcome to you and our quick response to a call to arms.

“You have doubtless seen the signal fires throughout the mountains. When they are lighted they mean that each clan has called to arms its quota of soldiers. As they are extinguished the clans have sent their soldiers on their way to the Holy Crater. To-morrow you will review the arriving armies. By midnight the signal fires all will have been extinguished. To-morrow we bid our families, our beloved wives and children, to be of good cheer, and to be hopeful and happy till our return, for we must ride each at the head of his clan. But this night is one for revel and joy. Therefore, noble stranger, we extend to you a hearty welcome into our homes, which are now open to receive you. You will participate in our pleasures, view the splendor of our palaces, and know the beauty of our mode of living.”

While the young orator was delivering his address of welcome, pages had placed in Zirkan's hand a wreath woven of bright flowers. At the completion of the oration Zirkan motioned to the speaker, who came forward, and the wreath was placed upon his head. Amidst much applause and enthusiasm a general reception was held, every one being properly presented to the visiting stranger. Then the kings and princes departed for their respective palaces, where Cyaxares would be received as he went from one palace to the other, spending only a moment at each place.

CHAPTER XI

WITHIN THE PALACES OF KINGS

CYAXARES, like many others, had heard of a city of kings, where the palaces were embellished with gold, and silver, and precious stones. But he could not even imagine a place so wonderful as this. It was not gaudy display of tinsel to tarnish with the ravages of time, for time immemorial had tried it. The fathers of the present kings, and their fathers before them, had dwelt here, and the city was as splendid to-day as it was centuries ago. There were ample street embellishments; the queer, winding street was wide and very clean, the ornamentation consisting of immense urns filled with flowers, each one having a tall fountain of water spouting up from its center. The street extended from wall to wall; no animals of any kind were permitted to be at large. The portals leading into the palaces differed radically in architecture and materials, this apparently being one of the subjects of friendly competition in display.

Each doorway bore the name of the king, and of the clan of which he was ruler, wrought in gems. Surrounding these names were masterpieces of the jeweler's skill; grape-vines made of silver, with leaves of pure gold, and with clusters of rubies as large as native grapes hanging thick upon the carved trellis; birds of various kinds, wrought in gold and silver, were on wing in a field of sapphires; battle scenes and pictures of peace and joy, and beautiful figures and a multitude of artistic designs. It was marvelous and bewildering.

But, if the outer walls were thus adorned, what could be said of the interiors of these palaces? As he passed through the first portal, Cyaxares was surprised to find himself in an interior court of rare splendor, its four walls containing the living rooms of the king and his family.

It was a garden so perfectly designed that it looked like a picture. In the center was a large fountain consisting of many beautifully wrought cherubims, their little bodies so perfect that they seemed to be alive. They held in their hands long feather-edged staffs, which broke the returning waters into a myriad tiny streams. Every wall, the floor, and the sides of the fountain were of onyx and rare marbles, with the edges and ornamented places made of gems, while bright flowers and sweet-scented foliage smiled from every available place. It was a tremendous display of wealth, comfort, and, doubtless, also of joy.

The people, the family of the king, came to greet the handsome young prince. The daughters, as beautiful as the surroundings were rich, held in their hands small eleven-stringed harps, which they softly thrummed with ivory plectrums as they sang their plaintive, native songs of welcome. In this particular household were the king, the queen, four lovely daughters, and three stalwart sons. Well might such a king be proud, and even boastful, in telling of his country up in the steppes, where his happy people dwelt in peace and plenty, where the pomegranate was perennial, the yield of grapes overlapped their needs, and the wheat grew without the sowing; where the hound was stronger than the wolf and swifter than the fox; where the people wore silken garments, and were prodigies of strength and endurance. On the morrow he

would see a thousand of them panoplied for war, with his eldest son as their leader. They all came close to him, eager to touch him, this being a token of utmost confidence. The young men placed their hands upon his shoulders, and the young women caressed his hands.

Refreshments were brought, consisting of delicious wine, honey-cakes, and candied figs, of which they partook sparingly because of many similar offerings to follow. Reluctantly they withdrew to make the next call, and then others, till all the palaces but one had been entered, the same sweetly simple cordiality being met with everywhere.

Here was a departure from what they had hitherto seen, this last palace. It was a tremendous structure, and was almost connected with the comparatively humble prison of the Sapor, carved out of the native cliffs:

“This is the palace of King Nahan, of the Nahanites. He is the oldest king in the Holy Crater, being now one hundred and twelve years old. He was leader in three holy wars, and is the most honored of all the kings, not only for his great age and learning, but for his splendid hospitality. He is also the wealthiest of all the kings. We shall remain in his palace one hour, when it will be almost morn, and time for us to take some rest to prepare us for the day.

“You will see in the palace of Nahan all the trophies of three holy wars. Many strange things are there, and some gruesome and grim reminders of periods when the Sapor sent the hosts of the holy clans down into the plains to purge them of their waywardness and wickedness. He of all the kings will question you. Answer him frankly, telling him your own desires regarding the dethronement of Deioces, for he despises him and is your father’s friend. Say nothing of the

abduction of the Princess Madrilla. Do not admit that you have seen the queen. Should he ask you, answer, 'I have seen the Sapor.'

King Nahan's palace was four times the size of any other palace that they had visited. The portals were wide and protected by immense, ornamental silver gates. Some formality was required here. The crier was waiting by the gates in friendly conversation with the two huge gatekeepers. They all straightened up at their approach. The crier struck a gong.

"Who comes there?" came from within.

"Messenger from the palace of the Sapor, King of Kings, and ruler over all the holy clans," was the response.

"The message?"

"The Sapor sends a royal visitor to give friendly greetings to all the kings, and to view the holy city. It is the Sapor's will that the Prince Cyaxares be received as a prince of the royal blood, and entertained the same as the ruler of a holy clan."

"Bid the royal guest enter."

The beautiful gates opened wide, and it seemed that a thousand lamps and flambeaux were lighted instantly. Many musical instruments began playing, and before them appeared an hundred female dancers, their graceful vibrating bodies writhing in unison as they coaxingly receded before the visitors until the latter were well within the splendid gardens, where all the other kings had preceded them, and now stood ready to receive them. In their midst was Nahan, a magnificent sage of huge proportions, and, despite his extreme age, of remarkable agility. Throwing aside all formality, he met Cyaxares with outstretched hands, greeting him as Phraortes' son, and begging for information con-

cerning the health and welfare of his noble father.

Now the purpose of this visit to the city of kings was revealed. Cyaxares was called upon at an early opportunity for the information necessary to enable them intelligently to proceed in their campaign.

The kings listened intently, while Cyaxares carefully, but fully, detailed the causes for war against Deioces, and surprised them by declaring that Deioces' army would be hammering upon the gates of Aspahan before their army could reach the plain. Then, in eloquent terms, he recounted the misdeeds of Deioces and the ambition that he held to place his father upon the throne again, and to rescue his people from a degrading slavery.

Nahan questioned him closely, and he acquitted himself creditably in his replies. The kings held a short consultation, and quickly decided to follow Cyaxares' advice in the conduct of the campaign.

One by one the leaders bade Cyaxares farewell, and departed, each for his own palace. Nahan, Cyaxares, and Zirkan sat together in one of the beautiful chambers in the palace. All revelry had ceased, and all was quiet in the city of kings. Nahan was first to speak, saying:

"Cyaxares, you have withheld from me your most potent reason for coming to the Holy Crater. Zirkan knows. I commend you for your conservatism. I have a great surprise in store for you. I know the story regarding Madrilla from one that has participated in your adventures in Baleria. Perhaps you do not know it, but Cracillies is my closest personal friend outside of the Holy Crater. He has entrusted to my care one of the principal actors in your experiences there. Wotan, the lord of war, passed her through the palace

and into the holy city, and she is now an honored guest in my palace. Wait a moment," and he arose, and left the room. In a few moments he returned leading by the hand a splendid woman, whose face was concealed.

For a moment she stood, as though waiting for instructions.

"Remove your veil," said Nahan.

The woman threw off her disguise, and stood before the prince.

"Saluciea!" exclaimed Cyaxares, springing up, and staring at her as though unwilling to believe his own eyes.

"What does this all mean?" he demanded.

"How can you be here, Saluciea? Speak, that I may know that I am awake and in my right mind."

Then she spoke in the same sweet, musical voice that he remembered so well.

"Yes. It is I — Saluciea. Take my hands. It is I, and I am so glad to see you again. I will tell you the story," and she looked about, while his own staring eyes followed her gaze. Both Nahan and Zirkan had quickly left the room.

He held the warm, soft hands, yet stood speechless, and with a great lump welling up in his throat. Well did he remember the grief that he had felt when bending over her cold body in the house in Baleria.

"Do not be alarmed. I am real flesh and blood," she said.

"And how came you here?" he asked.

"I will tell you. When you left me in the house in Baleria, I was in a cataleptic state superinduced by a potion that I believed would bring instant oblivion in death. I could not live and look into your face after

the base betrayal by me that I thought had unwittingly occurred. Scala and I had agreed to save you from destruction. The potion in the pendant was only intended to put its victim into a state of suspended animation. An antidote administered within a certain time would restore the victim to consciousness.

“You told your frightful story to Cracillies. When you said that tears fell from my eyes, he recognized the nature of the narcotic and sent his men to get my body, and I was conducted through the secret passageway to the caverns of Crail, where he restored me to life. I shall never forget the anguish of that deathlike spell. I was conscious all the time, but unable to move. I heard all that you said to me, and I must have unconsciously wept. Cracillies immediately sent me to the Holy Crater, and to the care of his beloved friend, King Nahan, believing war and revolution inevitable, and that my brother in his anger would betray me to Deioces, or torture me to compel me to tell the truth and the facts regarding you and your plans.”

“And why to Nahan?” asked Cyaxares.

“Because Nahan is my father. Saranaces is my half-brother. I was the ward of Deioces to conceal this truth. Deioces was bound by fear of the consequences to respect me.”

“Why did you permit the world to believe you the mistress of Deioces?”

“No one could trace the origin of this slander. I knew not what the world was believing of, or saying about, me until my brother had been raised to high honor, and had so taken me in his power that I was compelled to do his bidding. I knew that I was a king's daughter, begotten during the last holy war,

but I did not know who was my own father until Cracillies told me and sent me here. I had no means of combating the world in my own defense. I was the victim of circumstances over which I had no control. I tell you now, Cyaxares, that your coming awakened in me a new emotion, and, realizing my degradation and shame, I preferred to take my own life rather than have you think me the base creature that the cruel world had made me seem in your eyes. But, Cyaxares, I cannot detain you. I am overjoyed to see you again. I must leave you. I know you will come again. I will live in that hope." Arising she pressed the young prince's hands, and then fled quickly away.

This was a terrific shock to Cyaxares. From a state of high elation he was cast into a state of depression and gloom. He was filled with a sadness that he could not understand. He regretted the departure of the unhappy Salucia almost as much as her apparent death had cast him down on that other occasion.

The return of Nahan and Zirkan aroused him, but only by the strongest exertion of his will could he throw off the despondency, and again enter freely into the important conversation. Both the sages looked keenly at him. Nahan finally said:

"Salucia has told me the story, and it was with my permission that she revealed her identity to you. I own her as my daughter of war, and I have received her into my household with love and parental affection. I am most grateful to you, Cyaxares, that you have been the cause of her return to me."

Passing his hand over his disturbed brow, Cyaxares replied,

"I am most grateful to learn that this admirable daughter of your Majesty is again in the land of the

living, as well as pleased to know that she is in the house of her father."

"Come, we may walk through my palace as we talk. I wish to show you the trophies of former holy wars," and the three passed through long corridors filled with a wonderful museum of every conceivable relic and trophy of war; a thousand different weapons of warfare, shields, bucklers, helmets, armor, and accouterments for horse and man. There were scores of things that Cyaxares had never seen or heard of before. It was impossible to ask their uses.

Here was the huge armor of Septum, king of the Baharites, and the long iron pikes, weighing an hundred pounds each, carried by the giant warriors that had guarded him. Here was the golden helmet of the Helvite prince who penetrated the entire army and to the very tent of Nahan to slay him, at the sacrifice of his own life, only to be caught in the act and killed. Here were the skull and cross-bones of Kellukhan, the Hindoo prince, who had volunteered his services against the Sapor's army in the last holy war. And thus an hour quickly fled, and they returned to the reception room and prepared to take their departure.

Zirkan requested Cyaxares to stroll in the gardens a few moments; he would speak with Nahan and join him in a moment.

The perturbed young nobleman walked through the fragrant green; their freshness seemed to revive him, and to refresh his own senses.

The sweet-scented jasmine of Aleppo filled the air with a soothing fragrance; the pomegranate flowers seemed to be coaxing him to rest; the narcissus, sweet basil, and camomile caressed his tired soul, and bade him tarry in their midst. In a secluded spot, sur-

rounded by the flower-clad vines and shrubs, he sat upon the rim of a fountain of crystal waters, whose surface was covered with water-lilies. In a moment a shadow was cast upon the mirroring surface, and a whisper, soft, sweet, and inspiring, came,

“Cyaxares!”

At his side was Saluciea. He was glad. He had pressed her in his arms once before, but he hesitated now. This was a different Saluciea. Then he believed her to be a bad, designing woman, now he knew her to be one with a virgin heart and soul, longing for equal companionship. It was dangerous, but for a single moment he drew her to him, pressed her willing head upon his tumultuous bosom, and caressed the beautiful hair, as he whispered but the word, “Saluciea.” There was a world of pathos in the silent act.

Men and women, since the world began, have mistaken sympathy and a thirst for confiding companionship for love; love is of the flesh, sympathy is of the soul; when these unite in one sentiment that is eternal affection. Saluciea did not inspire Cyaxares with lust for the flesh.

“God speed you; my prayers go with you,” whispered Saluciea, and she quickly passed into the concealing surroundings. For a moment that same pang returned, the same lump in the throat, the feeling of desertion, and the desire to reach forth and draw her back to him.

Zirkan came and they took their departure. Instead, however, of their passing again through the silver gates, a long balcony extended from the rear of Nahan’s palace to the wide terrace extending about the abode of the Sapor. The sky showed signs of approaching day, and they both passed to their respective

apartments for much needed rest to freshen them for the arduous to-morrow.

Notwithstanding the exciting events through which he had recently passed and the perturbed state of his mind, Cyaxares dropped into a sound sleep. He again dreamed of Madrilla, not of Saluciea. Again Madrilla sat upon the throne, but this time he sat by her side. It was yet early when he awoke. Willing attendants quickly brought ewers of cold, sparkling water and large bathing vessels for his morning ablution. He felt refreshed and hungry. He waited patiently for his breakfast, the while seated at an open casement that gave him a view of the open space that surrounded the public edifice in the golden city, to which he had first been taken. There he saw unmistakable evidence of warlike activity. He had not seen an animal of any kind upon his visit there, but now the space was entirely filled with mounted horsemen drawn up in order. What a sight to inspire him! From time to time the clang of a great gong would sound, and a single horseman would drive his charge through the standing ranks, and stop in their midst. Immediately two fully accoutered horsemen would leave the ranks and join the horseman, one on either side. They would then dash away, and out of sight. This was rapidly thinning the horsemen till but few were left standing, and these were finally reduced to four mounted men.

So intently was Cyaxares' mind fixed upon this inspiring symbolism of war preparations that he did not hear Zirkan enter the room.

"It is the kings going to meet their clans. Each is esquired by two eager young princes chosen for that duty. Within the hour these same clans will begin to pour into the Holy Crater to be reviewed and given war

instructions. We must hasten our breakfast, for we may at any moment be summoned by the queen," and Zirkan motioned to a waiting attendant, and a delicious breakfast was before them.

They were hardly done with the repast when the soft intonations of a silver gong reached them. It was the call of the queen.

"This will be the most trying day of your life," said Zirkan. "I can only caution you that the queen will betray to you her infatuation for you, and warn you that no matter what your feelings or sentiments may be not to oppose nor resent any act or wish of hers. Should she become angered at any act of yours, your very life would pay the forfeit, and a holy war would sweep down upon the plains to devastate them. You will be alone with the queen. It is the highest privilege that mortal man can receive. Be enthusiastic over what you see. Praise her soldiers, and deplore the necessity of your having to leave her hospitality to answer to the call of duty. Five thousand picked soldiers will await your command, and you must place yourself at their head by sunset this night, ready to move at the earliest dawn. We must go to the queen."

CHAPTER XII

THE GATHERING OF THE CLANS

THE solemn procession of Zirkan, Cyaxares, and the huge black slaves again wended its way through the carven corridors of gray granite, stopping at the door of the Sapor's audience chamber. Here the slaves halted, and the two entered.

"Bow down to the Sapor, King of Kings!" came that terrible voice that Cyaxares remembered having heard on the occasion of his interview with the parchment Sapor.

They promptly made obeisance to the graven stone image. Zirkan looked surprised, for this was a challenge, meaning that the Sapor was upon her ivory throne. He had not been summoned into her presence, and he now stood in her audience chamber unbidden. What could this mean?

The image slowly receded and there sat the parchment, with blinking eyes and constantly tapping fingernails. Both Zirkan and Cyaxares made obeisance. She surveyed them sharply for a moment, then she said,

"Where are you going?"

"I report to your Majesty that the queen has bidden Prince Cyaxares to attend her while reviewing the gathering clans," humbly responded Zirkan.

"I forbid it!" snapped the monstrosity.

"Clang! Clang!" sounded an inner gong. It was the call of the impatient queen.

Here was real trouble.

"What response shall I make to the queen's call?" asked Zirkan.

"None!" was the brief answer, and Zirkan plainly betrayed his consternation.

"Clang! Clang! Clang!" and the clatter of the inner gong resounded throughout the palace. The Sapor sat motionless.

"Shall we retire?" asked Zirkan.

Paying no attention to this question she leaned forward, and almost whispered:

"Who is the strange woman in Nahan's household? Lie not to me."

Zirkan was so taken by surprise that he stammered in his confusion, "Why, why, she is a ward of the Holy Church, sent to Nahan by Cracillies for safe keeping."

"By what means was she passed into the holy city without my knowledge?"

"Nahan informs me that Wotan passed her into his palace."

"Have her brought here instantly," was the terrifying demand.

It was as much as Zirkan's life was worth to make such a demand upon Nahan at this critical time, and it was instant death to disobey the Sapor.

A most startling thing occurred at the opportune moment to divert the Sapor's attention. A queenly woman rushed into the audience chamber from the antechamber of the queen's apartments. It was the enraged queen herself. Paying no attention whatever to the presence of the Sapor upon her ivory throne, she angrily stamped her foot, and demanded to know of Zirkan why her summons was not obeyed.

Here was a dangerous clash of authority that could cause embarrassing complications.

The Sapor cautiously looked behind her, and Cyaxares surmised that she was trying to call to her side the vicious animals that he had formerly seen there, but they did not come. Suddenly she arose, and clapped her hands together, and still they did not come. She reached for her rod with which to strike her terrible gong; both the rod and the gong had been removed.

“Who seeks to destroy my authority here?” she demanded, and fire seemed to emanate from those terrible eyes.

Undaunted, the queen rushed to her, and exclaimed in a great passion:

“I am queen here! I am the Sapor! and in future my word and my will shall be the law,” and, before she could be stayed, she had seized the Sapor by her ropelike hair and dragged her down upon the floor and stamped upon her.

Zirkan, although horrified at what was transpiring, had exercised the presence of mind to close, and to fasten upon the inside, all doors opening into the chamber.

Cyaxares took the irate queen into his strong arms and held her, despite her struggles, else she would have killed her own mother. Nothing that he could say or do could render the situation worse, therefore he resolved to treat the queen as an angry woman instead of as an insanely enraged queen. He well knew that this was the culmination of a long standing feud. The queen had heretofore suppressed her pent-up rage that her own mother should bar her from what she believed her just rights. Her brooding over the early return

of Madrilla might have had much to do with this explosion, but what most concerned him was to think that her anger broke all bounds when she discovered that the Sapor had detained him after her repeated calls. When she ceased her hysterical struggles for a brief moment, he relaxed his tight grasp, and whispered,

“Can this be the royal mother of the sweet-tempered Madrilla?”

In this outburst of passion she had spent much of her fury, and now felt the relaxation that would quickly respond to this appeal, coming from him for whom she had secretly harbored an amorous sentiment. It was the fear of a non-requital of this passion that had wrought her up to this insane pitch. It was a revelation to Cyaxares. She ceased her struggles, buried her face in his bosom, and sobbed. It was love that she wanted, not power.

The poor creature lying half-stunned at the foot of her ivory throne had drawn herself to a sitting position against the dais, and now looked appealingly about, as if asking what had happened. Zirkan lifted her to her poor unsandaled feet, but she could not stand. It had been too much for her feeble strength. The shock had left her in almost a helpless state.

And now the reaction had come; the queen ran quickly to her side, and pleaded to be forgiven, bidding Zirkan bear her to her own apartment, she having previously dismissed therefrom all her retinue for ulterior purposes of her own. Turning now to Cyaxares, she extended her hands, saying:

“Forgive me, I am very much ashamed. Go and view the gathering of the clans with Zirkan. I am indisposed. Come to me before you join your army.” Her attitude was one of abject shame.

Cyaxares raised the willing hands to his lips, then he and Zirkan withdrew.

Zirkan mopped his brow, and looked thankfully at Cyaxares, and exclaimed:

“What fantastic freak of good or bad fortune is this now? Within a breath our lives are in peril, and then out of it. Who can understand a woman?”

Cyaxares only shook his head in response.

“We were in a perilous situation, and we witnessed something that I never wish to see again,” said Zirkan.

“I am fearful of the consequences,” answered Cyaxares.

“You need not be, for this has happened before. But I have never heard before of the queen’s actually assaulting her mother. There is one way of telling that a quarrel had preceded this scene; it is well known about the court that a quarrel is brewing when all the court attendants are forbidden to enter the Sapor’s audience chamber until summoned by special messenger. That accounts for the absence of the usual court attendants and even of the slaves and dogs. I shall breathe easier when you are away from here, Cyaxares.”

“If I breathe long enough to make my escape, I shall be grateful,” said Cyaxares.

“Come, we must go at once. As lord of war, I have a secret box from which to review the incoming armies. It was formerly used only by the Sapor, but the present Sapor will be in no condition to leave her bed. I am acting Sapor to-day, and now that they have stirred the devil in all of us I am going to do a radical thing. This event occurs but once in a lifetime. I am going to have a third party in our box for the simple reason that she is among strangers and

doubtless is in seclusion, therefore may never again have an opportunity to witness this grand pageant. With your consent I shall go to bring Saluciea, as the Sapor commanded. None can see us in our concealment."

"I surely would be overjoyed to have the lovely Saluciea with us, if it is perfectly safe," replied Cyaxares.

"Then we must be her slaves, for no one is permitted to enter the secret passage but the lord of war, therefore we must carry with us our own refreshments."

"I will gladly be slave for Saluciea," laughed Cyaxares.

Zirkan summoned a servant, to whom he intrusted the preparation of wine and delicious viands to refresh them during the long and tiresome review. Then he bade Cyaxares to await his return. In a short time he reëntered the room accompanied by a closely cowed priest, but no introductions followed. Closing the doors entering this room, Zirkan removed a tapestry from the wall, and opened a secret panel revealing the inevitable and omnipresent stone corridor.

Placing the hamper containing the refreshments within the corridor, he lighted a flambeau and handed it to Cyaxares, bidding him go in advance. The entrance was carefully closed, and fastened on the inside. Picking up the hamper, the lord of war exclaimed, in a voice revealing his great relief:

"There, we are as safe from interruption as if we were in the bottom of the Holy Crater itself. Let your pleasure be unrestrained."

They had only traveled about three hundred feet, when they entered a commodious and sumptuously furnished room. It had been freshly arranged, and was

sweet and wholesome. It was dimly lighted by long slits in two sides of the walls like balastraria. Freshly cut flowers made the air fragrant. A fountain of fresh mountain water bubbled in one side of the wall. Zirkan pushed a small table into the middle of the room, and arranged the refreshments in a manner to be convenient at a time when the excitement of the scenes would render it necessary for them to partake of them quickly.

Going to a wide tapestry, he folded it back against the wall, revealing an alcove balcony sufficiently large to accommodate them comfortably while viewing the scenes below. This balcony was wholly concealed by carefully trained vines, yet gave ample view of the space below them. Cyaxares was surprised to see that they were only about fifty feet above the reviewing ground.

"And now I should like to be introduced to our companion," said Cyaxares.

Saluciea, feeling safe, put aside all restraint, removed the priest's garb, and extended her hands to Cyaxares to be kissed ardently. This was to be a joyous day, and they abandoned themselves to its pleasures.

They ensconced themselves in the balcony and peeped below. What a singular sight it was! It was like an immense arena, in the center of which was a raised platform to receive the kings and their families, who would review the troops as they marched through this reviewing ground to take their position upon the highways toward the plains. It was separated from the holy city by its perpendicular cliff, three hundred feet in thickness.

Already the throng was gathering here. It was a

beautiful and animating sight, and they anticipated a great deal to interest and edify them.

Zirkan came to where they were seated, saying:

"I cannot find the lists. It is essential to have them in order to distinguish the clans as they pass. Remain here, and I will return for them," and he left them there together.

Cyaxares took Saluciea's hands in his own, and said:

"Saluciea, I cannot tell you the joy that I feel that you have come back to life. I hope I may never again experience the anguish that wrung my heart that night in Baleria."

Her face was radiant, and flushed with the genuine pleasure of being alone with Cyaxares, and this earnest speech brought the climax. She returned the pressure of his ardent hands, saying:

"Cyaxares, I never can forget the anguish of that night when I lay there conscious of your grief. I heard your endearing words. You said you could have loved a woman like me, even if you thought me another man's mistress. My soul strove to awaken that I might challenge that avowal; it was as an oasis in my desert life. I had never been loved by any one, nor had I loved; I yearned for an honest affection. My life, my love, my all was yours that night. Now all that is changed; I am the daughter of one king and the ward of another; I am the ward of the Holy Church, and protected by the strongest powers in the two countries, yet I am a dowerless, homeless creature, hungry and thirsting for the simple, honest, earnest love of a worthy man. Every woman is entitled to that. I suffered the pangs of death because I believed that I had betrayed you. Now, Cyaxares, love me

for one hour, and let that be the one green spot in my desolate existence, then let me die, that I may go through eternity with that one joy as the bliss of a future state. Then you will have made me happy. I know how futile it is for me to hope for your permanent love; your ambitions are great, and I would not intrude myself between you and the realization of your desires."

Cyaxares' love went out to this hungry-hearted woman as it had never gone out to any one before. In her rosy excitement she was beautiful, fascinating, magnificent. He took her into his arms and covered her with caresses; with equal ardor she kissed his hands, his hair, his forehead, and his lips. She moaned in her paroxysm of ecstasy. Enraptured, she lay panting in his arms; her moment of joy had come, Saluciea loved, as only an ardent, soul-hungry woman could love. She knew her worth, and she knew that she had implanted in Cyaxares' heart a fire to scorch his very soul did he ever hold another woman there. He was stricken as with a fatal disease, her passion had sunk deep into his virgin heart, and she knew that he would again seek her to drink more of that elixir of life that can come only from virgin lips. Therefore, when the sound of Zirkan's returning steps warned them, she implanted upon his lips the final caress, whispering: "Cyaxares, my love, I am so grateful. You have made me so happy. Go now to your battle. You will win. My love and prayers will be always hovering near you, and guarding you. Then come back to me, if it be for but a single moment."

"I will come, sweet Saluciea," and he held her for a moment close in his strong embrace.

When Zirkan entered the room they were eagerly

gazing at the scene below. Nevertheless, the good lord of war was having his troubles with a facial expression that persisted in developing into a good-natured smile. Handing the lists to Cyaxares, he said: "It is important for you to recognize all these different clans, for this will be of much advantage to you upon the battlefield." Then reaching over, he pinched Saluciea's cheek, saying: "I am careless. You are too pretty to be left alone with an impressionable young man like Cyaxares." She only laughed and pressed his hand against her burning cheek.

The kings had all taken their seats upon the reviewing stand, and for the first time Cyaxares discovered that hundreds of the priests of the Holy Crater were crowded upon a long balcony of another cliff to see the grand sight.

There was a blare of trumpets that announced to the assemblage that a body of soldiers was in sight. A dread silence fell upon the people. There came the pat, pat, pat, of marching feet. A tall banner could be seen bobbing about in one of the defiles leading into the arena, and then a burst of applause came from the waiting people as a magnificent sight presented itself. The head of a column of splendidly accoutered horsemen flashed into the sunlight, and fifty trumpeters challenged the reviewers.

"The Dolamites, the richest and most powerful clan in the confederation," said Zirkan. "See! There is King Dolam himself at their head, although his eldest son is in command. What a grand old warrior he is!"

"Grand!" whispered Saluciea, and she crept closer to Cyaxares, who unblushingly placed his arm about her shoulders and drew her up close to him. The excitement was now intense as they came nearer to the

people. The horsemen, numbering two hundred, wore armor of gold and silver, while the horses were completely covered with an armor of dead mail, with large colored plumes in their crests, and the lower part of the armor fringed and tasseled in the most artistic manner.

The horse-soldiers wore tall bonnets of pure white ermine, with a wide headband of gold, with a large jewel in the center of the forehead. They did not bear shields, instead, fastened to the left arm, was a wide vambrace of metal, taking the curvature of the arm from the top of the shoulder to the tips of the fingers. In their right hands they carried tremendous swords. These were their only weapons.

Following the horsemen were eight hundred foot-soldiers. They wore short tunics of dead mail, elongated shields, seven-foot spears with casting straps, and short, heavy swords; upon their feet were heavy leather buskins. Each man wore a close-fitting copper cap, with a rim of ermine running around the brim.

Stolid and grim they came, never stopping but passing into a defile on the opposite side, and disappearing from sight. Hardly had they gone when the trumpeters announced the coming of a second division.

"The Gothites," said Zirkan. "These are terrible men, as you may judge by their appearance. They had no horsemen, but fifty men, carrying short ox-tail banners, marched in advance of the main column. They made no sound as they marched because they wore moccasins made of softly dressed leather.

"Let me call your attention to their armor," said Zirkan. "It is made of ox-hide thongs twisted into ropes and woven upon the body of the soldier, in order

that it may fit him perfectly. When the call of war comes, they don this invulnerable suit, and it is tightly laced upon them, not to be removed till the war is ended. The officers and men are dressed alike in order that the officers may not be individually picked off in battle. Their weapons consist of a small, round shield, and a short, stout dagger attached to a rawhide thong twenty feet in length and looped upon their wrists. They cast these daggers with such precision and strength that they plunge them to the hilt into their victims, then snatch it back into their hands by a sudden jerk of the line. In close fighting they do the most terrible execution. Their bonnets are of the same material, with a flap extending down to protect their necks, their faces and hands alone being exposed. This singular armor is soaked in oil, and turns the points of both arrows and ordinary spears. These intrepid men fight at close quarters, and are terrible to cope with."

A thousand tremendous Veloix horsemen came next. Both the horses and the men were extraordinary in size, giving to these troopers a grandeur in keeping with their powers to do battle. They were heavily armored, men and horses, the armor consisting of alternating plates of copper and silver, highly polished. The ranks marched in advance of the princely leader. When wholly within sight of the reviewing stand, the troops deployed into two columns, on parade, with their tremendous silver-bladed pikes crossed high in the air. Beneath this glinting archway the Prince Helgrave, and his splendid retinue, rode to the front, reviewing his own troops and taking his position as leader. Then the steady "Clank! Clank! Clank!" of war passed on. There was no applause. Even kings

were awed into deathlike silence as this terrible shimmer and clank of war passed between the cliffs and out of sight.

"What is this?" exclaimed Cyaxares. "Look! You cannot see a man, yet the whole mass is moving rapidly. I do not understand this." Saluciea clung to him as if afraid. Zirkan stood up in his excitement, and stared in amazement at the queer spectacle, saying:

"It is new to me, but that banner of black ox-tails belongs to the Hoplites. This is something new, surely."

On came the solid mass of black, and still not a man could be seen. As the body passed beneath them, they looked down upon a solid tent of steel, which completely concealed a thousand men. It was a singular and an awe-inspiring sight. Suddenly the tents were ripped asunder, and it was seen that their armor consisted of six-foot convex steel shields in sets of ten, chained together at their edges. Through a ring, and between the shields, protruded large pikes. When the shields rested upon the ground the whole ten shields were braced by these pikes into an impregnable fortress, the butts of the pikes being sunk into the earth, while the points projected out in the front twelve feet to receive a cavalry charge. Twenty men followed behind each ten shields. By overlapping the tops in marching the men were wholly concealed, and they were protected from arrows from points above them. Their weapons of warfare could not be made out. Cyaxares was deeply concerned about this strange equipment and made a mental determination to see it in action.

Before they could comment further, they were

aroused by the approach of the most startling thing that they had yet seen. The Shalemites were coming. All the kings arose in alarm. The priests along the high gallery could be seen running excitedly about, pointing and gesticulating like mad. Their position gave them an earlier view of the approaching troops. Amid the most fear-inspiring screams and howls and screeches there came thundering by a thousand wild men, each mounted on a wild horse without bridle or saddle, and leading by a long rawhide thong one of those terrors of the steppes, the wolflike dog such as guarded the Sapor. Every hair was a bristle, and they were all standing out like quills. These beasts were furiously baying, their long white fangs snapping like castanets as they threw their vicious bodies about, running with the equally vicious, foam-covered horses that were squealing and biting at their fellows. The men wore trunks made of rawhide and a wide cincture of black metal extending from their armpits to their hips. They carried small round copper shields and twelve-foot spears.

As they swept past the reviewers like a raging tempest, Salucia hid her face in Cyaxares' bosom, the prince held his breath in amazement, and Zirkan dropped back exhausted with the excitement that this terrifying clan had inspired.

"The Shalemities," he groaned. "They are the fanatics. In battle they cannot be restrained, for they have no leader. They rush upon the enemy in the night, stampede their horses, turn these savage, man-eating dogs upon the soldiers, and so demoralize an army that it is easy to follow it up and win a battle."

Evidently the passing of this band of savages had greatly excited the kings. They stood in groups

wildly gesticulating, and the clamor of their excited voices could be heard by the watchers in the alcove above. Then all turned again to the approach. The beautiful gold-spangled, silken banners of the Basques were pluming the crest. Now King Bassal himself was seen riding alone in advance of his army, his great white charger prancing and gracefully nodding his proud head as if trying to call attention to his gold-mounted accouterment and the bouncing plume of tufted silks that perched high above his alert ears.

The king was a young man with golden hair and fair skin. He was dressed in white and gold, while a wide train of magnificent ermine edged with purple panoplied his steed, trailing over the haunches almost to the ground. He wore no bonnet, but about his head was a wide gold band with the usual rare gem in the center of the forehead. He carried no weapon. Following this splendid king came fifty men, arrayed, in almost equal splendor, every man a prince. Swung to their shoulders by gold cords, with tassels of silver, were long polished cow-horns made into trumpets, their soft notes sounding like sweet music when sounded in unison, their concordant notes seeming to search out the nooks in the very walls. These trumpeters wore tall hats of ermine with cockades of yellow. The troopers were all mounted upon splendid white horses, each horse being half-armored by a blanket of linked silver, covering also the head and neck. The men wore close-fitting tunics of mail, with ermine-trimmed, quilted silver basinets with camail extending down about the neck and attached to heavy metal roundlets at the top of the shoulder. Their armament consisted of a small oval shield, a short stout sword, and a long sword-edged spear. This was a splendid troop, and

the young king was popular. All the kings arose and saluted him, while hundreds of priests waved their hands from the distant balcony. The king, keen of eye, gracefully acknowledged the greetings of both kings and prelates.

"A beautiful sight," sighed Saluciea.

"A handsome king," said Cyaxares. But his happy companion only pressed his arm, and looked beseechingly up into his face, her big blue eyes aglow with the growing passion that close proximity had inspired. Zirkan being just at that moment engaged in arranging the refreshments, Cyaxares drew her close up to him, and pressed upon her lips the kiss that kills or cures. The enamored woman trembled with the excitement of soul desires as she whispered, "Could I be certain of forever remembering this blissful hour, I would gladly die that I might not trouble you more, my dear Cyaxares."

"Never cease troubling me, if this is trouble," replied Cyaxares.

"Oh, but, my king, I know that I can never be more to you, therefore I am feasting my soul in this hour of joy. I have so long been heart-hungry that I am overjoyed even to receive the breath of love. You are a man. You do not know, you cannot know the longings of a woman that has never been loved. Something tells me that I may never see you again. Perhaps you may fall a victim of war; wounded unto death you may fall with no one to nurse you back to life. Cyaxares, I am strong, I am brave, I have been seized with a wild desire to go with you. Let me put on armor and fight by your side. Let me be your aide. I will make a good, obedient soldier, and I know that you will need me. Please, Cyaxares!"

Cyaxares listened in amazement, exclaiming: "Salucia! Why, why, what is this that you are saying? Surely you are losing your mind."

She only held out her hands, pleading "Please," with a pathos in her sweet, flutelike voice that searched his very center. He could not quickly recover from the shock that this astounding proposition gave him, yet there was something within closely akin to joy as he looked into her lovely face, and said it all over to himself.

A discreet clearing of the throat warned them that Zirkan was coming. He had arranged the delicious luncheon upon a small table, which he now pushed into the alcove to enable them to partake without losing any part of the rare show without.

"Zirkan, is Nahan at his extreme age going to the front?" Salucia almost looked frightened at this question. Could it be possible that Cyaxares would accept her challenge? Before Zirkan could make answer there was a blare of trumpets, and the shouts of applause could be heard plainly.

"Look!" exclaimed Zirkan. "Your question is quickly answered. See the grand old man!"

"My father!" whispered Salucia.

Cyaxares looked in astonishment. There, in jet black armor and riding a black horse with black accouterments, was none other than King Nahan, one hundred and twelve years old, and yet an imposing figure, strong and erect as any young prince. Then he stole a glance at Salucia. There was a look of triumph in her eyes that were now full of the fires of war. He was afraid to look again for he was more than puzzled. He was tempted as he had never been tempted before.

Now his attention was drawn to the awe-inspiring sight below. What was this, a funeral cortége? The applause had ceased. The kings sat in silent contemplation of this dread-inspiring reminder of warfare. An escort of twenty grim horsemen, all accoutered in funeral black, accompanied Nahan; then came that funeral band, every man in jet black armor with a tall black plume in the top of his helmet. Upon their roundlesed shoulders they carried tremendous black battle-axes. They inspired one with creeping horrors as their singular rumbling tread—tramp! tramp! tramp!—sounded as steadily and as rhythmic as the strokes of time. This was not pomp nor parade, this was death stalking forth to do battle. No soldier could look upon this symbol of night and retain his courage. It inspired the kind of dread that causes men to throw down their arms and seek a place to hide themselves. These were veterans that had neither scruples about killing others nor fear of death themselves.

Saluciea shivered and crept closer to Cyaxares. Cyaxares looked at Zirkan. They sat silent for a moment, then Zirkan said: "Yes, that means war. Nahan will conduct the campaign."

Clan after clan came and went, bowmen, spearmen, swordsmen, the primitive tribes, dressed in skins and bearing clubs, slingmen with their well-laden pouches and death-dealing rawhide slings, and lastly a thousand bell-ringers, another queer weapon of warfare. But none inspired the onlookers as did the regiment of death that grimly followed the old warrior Nahan.

It was over; the clans of the Holy Crater had passed out to do battle upon the plains. A pang of sadness was left in every heart. How many of these brave

men would return? But it was now too late to weep. It might mean that the whole world would become involved in war, calling for a million more. They would promptly respond to the call.

They were standing in the alcove preparatory to returning to the palace. Saluciea placed her hands upon Zirkan's shoulders, saying,

"My dear, good Zirkan, I want to go to the war."

"Why, Saluciea, what do you mean?"

"I mean just what I say, I want to go to the war, I want to put on armor and go to war with him," and she pointed at Cyaxares who stood, uncertain what to do or say.

Zirkan looked startled. He stared first at Cyaxares, then at Saluciea, finally grunting: "Huh! I'll think about it. We must return to the palace quickly. You must at once prepare for your departure, Cyaxares. Your own men will be awaiting you where you left them. Then you will be conducted to the head of your army."

CHAPTER XIII

THE DEATH OF THE SAPOR

UPON their return to the rooms of Zirkan, they were alarmed to hear a tumult in the palace. The great hounds were baying; loud moans could be heard, and there were other indications that something out of the ordinary had occurred during their absence.

Zirkan hastened to get Saluciea safely back to Nahan's palace, then returned to investigate. In the audience chamber he found the council sitting in silence, and waiting for him. They arose, holding up their hands, and emitting groans.

"What does this mean?" demanded Zirkan.

"The Sapor is dead!" they whispered.

"The Sapor dead!" exclaimed Zirkan in an awed whisper.

"Yes, she passed away an hour ago. The queen is alone with her, and bids you come to her at once. We could not find you, and her wails have grown louder each minute. Listen!"

"O-o-o-o!" The mournful wail of death echoed through the unsympathetic corridors.

Hastening through the antechamber of the queen's apartments, Zirkan was quickly admitted into the chamber of death.

The queen arose, and, with streaming eyes and self-accusing mien, she pointed to the pitiful creature lying lifeless upon a couch, and screamed: "I killed her! Oh! I killed her, and she was my mother! What shall

I do?" Then she smote her bosom in her great distress.

Zirkan stood with bowed head until the quiet was broken only by her sobs, then he said:

"Restrain your grief, your Majesty. Death must come to every one. You must not accuse yourself of destroying your mother. You did not. She was frail, and her time had come. I must acquit you of your self-accusation."

"Oh, Zirkan, you comfort me much, but my conscience is not so generous. I feel that my act in the presence of you and our noble visitor was the direct cause of my poor mother's death. But my life has been one constant disappointment after another. The king was too cruel to me, and my mother usurped my rights and prerogatives as queen. O but I did not mean to be so cruel. I did not mean it." And her voice again broke into the wail that had been heard without.

Suddenly she arose, stepped to the couch, and threw a robe over the figure, then turning to Zirkan, she said:

"Zirkan, I am the Sapor. Go bring to this chamber the Prince Cyaxares. I wish to consult with him regarding this war." Zirkan bowed and retired. As he passed out through the audience chamber he paused, saying:

"Yes, the Sapor is dead. The queen desires to know the wishes of the council of state regarding the succession, the Sapor's last words being that the queen should become the Sapor. There are urgent reasons why immediate action should be taken, because Prince Cyaxares was ready to receive his authority in this war by the seal of the Sapor. The whole army knows this, therefore we should by all means conceal from

the kings and from the whole outside world the sudden demise of the Sapor, and place the queen upon her throne with all the powers of the Sapor, that the army be not demoralized. . . . The prince is now awaiting his final instructions before going to the head of the army assigned to him. I am helpless to act without the Sapor's instructions. I suggest that we, in our authority under such emergencies, declare the queen to be the ruling Sapor, and swear the young prince to secrecy before he takes his departure."

Zirkan's suggestion was adopted, and the great council of state declared the queen to be the ruler in fact over all the Holy Crater, the lord of war being instructed to convey to the queen these glad tidings.

Cyaxares waited for Zirkan's return with great impatience, because of the certainty that a calamity had occurred. He was greatly shocked to learn that the Sapor had passed away. He regretted having witnessed the outburst of anger on the part of the queen, because he could not help believing that that assault was the indirect cause of the frail creature's death. Zirkan quickly advised him of what had occurred, and especially warned him against any word or act that might be construed as disapproving of what had been officially done. The queen was now the Sapor, and supreme over the law itself. Moreover, she was quick to jealousy or offense. He would hasten back to the queen's chambers, and Cyaxares was shortly to follow.

Reëntering the queen's reception room, Zirkan said to the queen:

"If it pleases your Majesty, the council of state, awaiting the will of the Sapor to give to her army final instructions, was assembled in the great audience

chamber when word came unto them that the Sapor was dead. The urgency of the occasion caused them immediately and officially to declare your Majesty Sapor and ruler supreme over the Holy Crater. The Prince Cyaxares is waiting without to receive his last instructions."

Making no comment on the announcement that she had been declared the Sapor, she said:

"Bring Cyaxares to my audience chamber. I must have private audience with him. Then you prepare the golden casket, place within it the remains of the dead Sapor, and be ready to consign it to the Holy Crater within the hour."

Zirkan conducted Cyaxares to the beautiful chamber in which he had been first received by the queen. She was alone, not even a slave or other attendant being in sight. As she posed, half reclining, upon a richly appointed divan, she was really a magnificent specimen of womanhood.

As he stood hesitating for a moment, she arose, extended her hands, and said:

"I am glad you have come, Cyaxares. I need a friend in this trying hour. Zirkan has told you?"

"Yes, your Majesty. You have my greatest sympathy. I am wholly at your service."

"You know that I am now the Sapor?"

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Don't call me 'Your Majesty.' My name is Nahali. I grant you the privilege of calling me Nahali, as I call you Cyaxares."

"It will be most difficult for me to assume that familiarity with so great a queen."

"To you I am something greater than a queen, I am a woman; honor me as a woman, for I have been

deprived of that homage all my life. Could I do so with safety, I would flee to the wilds of yonder mountains to escape from this imprisonment that is crushing the life and spirit out of me. Oh, Cyaxares, you do not know what my life has been, or you would pity me," and, to his wonderment, she covered her face with her hands, and wept till the tears were visible upon her fingers.

Cyaxares was much touched by this strange confidence on the part of a woman harassed by grief and desire, and was puzzled to know what to do or say. But again he decided to accept the challenge and treat her as a woman, ignoring the fact that she was now the most powerful ruler in all the world.

"I regret having come here, for it seems that I have brought only trouble upon you,—Nahali," he said in a kindly, regretful tone.

She noted the hesitation, and caught her breath as he spoke the name Nahali.

"How sweetly my own name sounds when spoken by you, Cyaxares. I have not heard it spoken before in ten years."

"I am so sorry that you are unhappy, and you now the greatest of all queens," he said.

"Is it unreasonable for me to be unhappy? I have been within these prison walls all my life. My king was cruel and hateful toward me. I was deprived of my daughter's love when she was all that I had to console me, and when I most needed her. My mother, always a strange, wild, and eccentric being, took her greatest delight in tormenting me. She is now gone, and I hold the hollow and thankless honor of being made the Sapor in a moment by the powers that rule the world. I am sick and tired of it all."

"Perhaps the coming of your beloved daughter will change things to make your life a happier one," suggested Cyaxares.

"I am fearful that I will not now love her as I did when she was a sweet and beautiful child. Moreover, it would be entirely in keeping with all my other troubles for her to try to annul my election as the Sapor, for she knows the provisions of her father's will."

"I cannot imagine the sweet Madrilla having any trait that could hurt another," said Cyaxares, noting the suggestion that the powers of the Sapor might be taken away from her. Evidently she thought it more than a hollow honor. "May I ask, your Majesty, if the name Nahali implies relationship to Nahan?"

"Nahan is my father's brother. My uncle is not friendly to me," she said, with a sigh.

"It is well for me to know these matters, for I am your friend," he ventured. Nevertheless, he was startled at his own thoughts. Salucia was the only daughter of Nahan, who had now taken her to his bosom, acknowledging her as his own. Moreover, Nahan was the strongest figure in the confederation.

"Instruct me, your Majesty,—Nahali, what you would have me do during this war, that I may be of special service to you."

"Finish it quickly and return here. Life is short," was the prompt reply.

"But you know my ambition is to redeem Little Ironia."

"You will be greater here than as king over Ironia, and you may rule Ironia also," was her startling reply.

Complications were looming big before he had even started for war.

"I need you now greatly, you and Zirkan. The

outside world must know absolutely nothing of what has happened within the walls of this palace. It believes that the king still lives, and it must continue to believe so. I will summon Zirkan," and she softly struck her silver gong.

Zirkan quickly appeared.

"Is all in readiness?" she asked, with a little gasp.

"Yes, your Majesty."

"Come," she said to Cyaxares, "let me lean upon you, for I need support in this trying hour," and she motioned to Zirkan to go forward.

Passing through a long corridor, Zirkan led the way. Nahali was scarcely able to proceed. Boldly Cyaxares said,

"Allow me this great honor of supporting you," and he passed his strong arm about her soft, yielding body, and supported her as they walked. She offered no resistance.

Entering a queer, circular room, Zirkan tapped a gong softly, and six powerful Ethiopians entered in procession. The first two carried upon a litter a golden casket. It contained the remains of the Sapor. The other four slaves bore two litters, upon which were two strong silken bags.

Cyaxares looked questioningly at Nahali.

"Her faithful dogs," she whispered.

They now walked to the center of the room, where yawned a black chasm extending into the dark depths below.

"For thousands of years this has been the sepulchre of the Sapor," she whispered.

Ropes of great length had been attached to the casket and to the bags, and now they were dropped down, down, till the ends of the ropes were reached. Zirkan

looked at Nahali, and she drew Cyaxares to the edge. The ropes were released. Not a sound was heard. They had passed into unknown space in this bottomless pit, the heart of the Holy Crater.

Nahali staggered back, and Cyaxares grasped her in his arms. At a motion from Zirkan, he bore her back through the corridor to her own apartment, and gently placed her upon her couch, where she lay white and calm. He remained by her side until she recovered with a moan, which smote him to his very marrow. It was the wail of a heart-sore and lonely being.

“Nahali,” he whispered.

“Cyaxares, you are good, but you must go now. But come back quickly.”

He stood for a moment, then gave way to the emotion pent-up within him. Grasping her hands he caressed them as he pleaded with her to arouse herself, to be brave, and to remember that he was going to war for her. He would bring back happiness to her sad and lonely life.

Truly, sympathy is close akin to love. She kissed his hands, and bade him good speed. A feeling of sorrow possessed him as he passed out of the room. Here was another great soul pining for the simplest form of love and comforting companionship. “Surely,” thought he, “the world is misbalanced.”

Zirkan impatiently awaited him.

“Come, Cyaxares,” he said, “you have no time to tarry. The sun is now below the mountain rim. You must join the army ere it is dark, for with the first light of day you must be marching. I have prepared all credentials and advices giving you full and free authority over your own division of five thousand men. These will be given to you by your captain of guards,

the young Prince Hanan, son of Nahan, whom I commend to you as a companion and confidential aide. Now good fortune go with you. You have the goodwill and confidence of the great council. You must quickly don this coat of mail. You will find all other equipment in your tent."

"Zirkan, I cannot fully express to you my gratitude for the kindness that you have heaped upon me here. The future, no doubt, will give to me some suitable opportunity to repay you. Must I go without saying farewell to Salucia?"

The high priest stood for a moment in deep thought, then he suddenly said,

"Yes, you must depart now," and he conducted him to the outer room where his body-guard awaited him. It consisted of twelve splendidly accoutered men who surrounded him, and, without a word, passed on out of the Sapor's palace, through the gardens of the priests of the Holy Crater and to the small plateau where his former retinue and horses awaited them.

Prince Hanan saluted his chieftain, and presented to him a sealed packet, containing his instructions from the powers in the Holy Crater. At Cyaxares' bidding the prince took a position by his side, and the cavalcade proceeded to the lower plateau, where his army awaited him.

That night by the light of flambeaux a war council was held in the camp of Prince Cyaxares. Each division commander received his last instructions, and sleep encompassed the camp.

By a small silver lamp Cyaxares broke the seal upon the packet, which had been delivered to him. It contained but three documents. The first was a brief notice that the great council of the Holy Crater, at the

will of the Sapor, had elected him a prince of the clans of the Holy Crater, with all the rights and privileges granted to all other princes and kings of the holy city. This legalized all his acts of war.

The second document was an affectionate message from Nahali, the Sapor, begging him not to endanger needlessly his life, wishing him all good health and the good fortunes of war. The startling clause in this note was,

“As an adopted member of the Sapor’s household, I warn you against entangling alliances with women.” Cyaxares pondered long and earnestly over this parental interest in his personal affairs. He could foresee troubles ahead perhaps more dangerous than the war itself, yet he took no deep offense that Nahali had thus threatened him. It was something to flatter the most indifferent man. But he was not wholly indifferent. There lingered in his heart a sentiment for the lonely queen that made him regret to leave her there alone. Her household was not one to inspire her with pleasure or satisfaction. While the women chosen for her companions were well-meant and carefully selected, they were native princesses with limited knowledge of the world. Her longing for a broader view and closer contact with worldly things constantly irritated her, and caused her to chafe at her luxurious imprisonment.

Cyaxares seemed to be the embodiment of that great world beyond, into which she was trying to peer. Had he never come, she would have taken her returning daughter Madrilla, who had been out in that sea of mystery, into her bosom and her confidence. The old motherly love would have been doubly enhanced by a new, womanly companionship that would have been superb, making them both happy and contented.

But it would be quite different now; the demon jealousy had dethroned motherly affection, and had already implanted in Nahali's mind a teasing uncertainty, a suspicion that already, perhaps, there was something of love between this masterful young noble and her daughter. A morbid nagging kept her heart sore and her temper irritated. Coming of a fiercely independent race, nothing could curb her when once aroused, though beneath this turbulent exterior purred one of the most affectionate and lovable characters that a discriminating God ever created. It was glimpses of this shining through her temporary aberration that was now teasing and puzzling Cyaxares as he contemplated the possibilities of future dangers.

With a perturbed mind the prince now opened the third document. It was more at length, being Zirkan's full, friendly, and careful instructions and advice. It was well-meant, but most indiscreet, for the highest official of the Sapor's household thus to give advice to a comparative stranger, even mentioning the Sapor's name.

It warned him that the Sapor had become so enamored of him that his ambitions to succeed his father upon the throne of Ironia might be dashed, yet it hinted at greater honors. He especially cautioned him not to place himself in a compromising attitude with Madrilla. This seemed to be the danger point, Zirkan even hinting that smaller things had previously precipitated devastating holy wars. He felt disappointed that no mention was made of Salucia. Love, evidently, was a dangerous element in the life of the Holy Crater, yet the most beautiful peace and amity seemed to prevail in the city of kings.

Placing the documents in his bosom the weary young

prince retired, and was soon wrapped in the slumbers of the virtuous, and for the third time he dreamed of seeing Madrilla upon the throne, but this time he saw himself as a suppliant, apparently pleading a cause in which Saluciea was involved, for she was kneeling and clinging to his hand, while Nahali was peering at them from behind Madrilla's chair, and there was a malevolence in her face intimating some sinister interest. He was so shocked at this sleeping picture that he awoke to find himself in a cold sweat, notwithstanding the temperature without was now like a wintry blast. He could sleep no more, but stepped outside his tent and stood viewing the star-bedecked heavens.

"The Prince Cyaxares arises early," said a gentle voice at his side, and, as he quickly turned to view the speaker, he saw that it was the young Prince Hanan, whose tent adjoined his own.

"Ah, 'tis you, my dear Prince Hanan. You startled me, and why are you yourself not wrapped in virtuous sleep?"

"I am not accustomed to the excitement of war, therefore my wits are in a turmoil. I cannot keep my eyes closed."

"And I will remind you that when I saw your eyes to-day, I noticed that they very much resembled those of your sister, Saluciea, as does also your voice."

"So I have been told by others," replied the youth, with becoming confusion.

"The moon is full blown; let us walk in its light and talk of our coming struggle," said Cyaxares, and he called his tent guards to remain near them for protection.

It was a magnificent night. The heavens seemed studded with untold wealth in diamonds, sparkling and

twinkling as though signaling to one another. Hanan pointed this out to Cyaxares, saying:

“I wonder if the hosts of heaven are going to war. They are using our signal code.”

Cyaxares watched them for a moment, then replied:

“All nature seems to conform to the same rules in warfare. I should not wonder if these are nations challenging one another.”

“Or maybe lovers signaling that all is well,” returned Hanan.

“Oh, you are in love,” exclaimed Cyaxares. “Well, I will be your champion. Serve me well, and I will help you to attain the object of your affections.”

“I will record that promise,” quickly responded Hanan. “But what promise of personal sacrifice do you give as security that you will keep your pledge?”

“If I must give bond, then I pledge my honor that I will make any personal sacrifice to aid you in securing the object of your love,” said Cyaxares, earnestly.

“Exchange rings with me on that,” and Hanan withdrew from his own finger a ring that barely fitted upon the small finger of Cyaxares’ hand. The latter also gave to Hanan a ring.

“I have a great liking for your father,” said Cyaxares.

“My newfound sister informs me, in a burst of sisterly confidence, that she has a great liking for you.”

“I feel deeply complimented, for Salucia is a woman among all the women that I have ever known. I can tell you in confidence as a kindred spirit, that I find it most difficult to analyze my sentiment for Salucia. I could adore her as a sister, to whom I could take my sorrows and my joys. I envy you for having this privilege.”

“See the falling star!” exclaimed Hanan, pointing to a long streak of red in the sky. “I thought the hosts of heaven were exchanging war signals. It is a fallen king. It must be reflected upon earth. That means Deioces,” and thus they passed an hour, returning to their tents composed and ready to sleep.

At the first flash of day the trumpets sounded and the camp was astir, well rested and ready for a long, tedious day’s march.

Cyaxares’ army must march down through the Derbend pass, between the Caucasus mountains and the Caspian sea. The balance of the great army was to make way through the numerous mountain passes to the east.

Cyaxares had wondered how this vast army was to be sustained in the field. As he had reviewed them in the Holy Crater, there was no intimation of a commissary corps. But now he beheld long trains of ox-drawn, two-wheeled carts emerging from the plain below, and he knew that all was well.

The army was moving. Soon the field of action would be reached, and the horrors of warfare would manifest themselves.

“I am sad as the hour for the shedding of human blood approaches,” said Cyaxares to his companion.

“No more so than I,” replied Hanan. “I prefer peace and quiet.”

“Hanan,” exclaimed Cyaxares, “I like your kind, gentle nature. Let us pledge ourselves to defend each other in this war to the last drop of our blood, and let us hold together thus through life, for good or bad luck,” and they struck hands in token of eternal friendship.

CHAPTER XIV

THE BATTLE BEFORE ASPAHAN

THE hard and tiresome march of sixty thousand men from the Holy Crater was a thing to try men's souls; nevertheless, the army was in splendid condition upon reaching a point where a view of the plains could be had. It needed no other stimulus to revive the lagging spirits of the soldiers of the Sapor. They looked, they saw a glittering army in front of the city of Aspahan, and they were filled with blood-thirsty desire to do battle.

A messenger had arrived at the headquarters of the captain general saying that Cyaxares' army lay in the ravines leading into the Ironian passes, was in splendid condition, had made complete connection with the signal corps of Cambyses, and awaited the signal to move forward and take possession of the defiles, and cut off Deioces' retreat.

Eager to watch the fierce combat that would occur upon the meeting of the two armies, Cyaxares, taking with him Hanan and a body-guard of twelve men, went to a promontory overlooking the battle-field, arriving there before the break of day.

As the sun arose, amidst a sea of crimson and gold, they beheld a wonderful sight. During the night a mysterious power had erected about the army of Deioces a tremendous barricade of scrub cedars, miles upon miles of it. Behind this curious fortification could be seen division after division of the holy army.

As a whole it looked like a great animal ready to spring upon its prey.

That Deioces' army was surprised and alarmed at this unexpected apparition was apparent from the activity in his camp.

Now it was discovered that the fortress was moving. It was drawing closer and closer, the circle was narrowing, and its ends were gradually turning the flanks of Deioces' army. Something had to be done and that quickly, else this great serpent would draw its coils about the army and so hamper its movements that it would be quickly crushed. Suddenly a body of two thousand horsemen dashed in a charge against the barrier. Not two hundred out of the two thousand escaped. Instead of going over, or through, the barrier, as they expected to do, they were impaled upon the thousands of huge pikes concealed in the foliage of the cedars of which the pile was constructed.

This instant loss of a large part of his horsemen startled Deioces to a realization of his imminent peril. His whole army began to move. From the flat plain he could not see the overwhelming numbers concealed behind that far-reaching and seemingly frail fortress. That was its chief object.

Deioces gave the one order, "Penetrate the barrier, and engage the enemy at close quarters." Cyaxares was in easy reach of his own army, therefore the trend of battle toward his position did not alarm him. It brought within close range the acute features of the battle. It was fascinating. Ten thousand warriors made a dash for the barrier. They reached it, evidently intending to top it.

"Look!" exclaimed Cyaxares, in amazement. A section of the barrier seemed to rise in the air for a

moment and then descend, engulfing the front ranks of the charging army. The army fell back in consternation, and started a disorderly retreat. Again the barrier was raised, and from beneath it came those protecting shields. Not a man could be seen, but with a deathlike certainty that mass of black metal approached the army that had been halted in its retreat. Suddenly it stopped, and from between the tall shields came a shower of arrows. There was a mysterious row of kneeling reserves behind those shields that did not seem to be in action, but when with a shout Deioces' army plunged forward, both horsemen and footmen bent on demolishing that formidable shield, an unexpected thing occurred. The shields were momentarily lowered, the reserves arose, and made a quick motion, and again sank behind the protecting shields. That was the most startling thing that ever happened to an army. The air was literally black with whirling discs of black metal, the edges of the discs being as sharp as a knife-blade. They mowed down men and beasts alike, cutting and slashing as no other weapon could. Blood flowed like water. In the period of shock the reserves arose and shot another stream of death into the faltering ranks. This new weapon of warfare was more than any army could withstand. Destruction of the whole army was inevitable. The line began to fall back, leaving a dead row equal in proportion to the barrier of scrub cedars.

Cyaxares, fearing that a precipitate retreat might send Deioces' army pell-mell into the passes, had given the signal, and his army had separated into five divisions of a thousand men each, and they were closing the gateways into Ironia against Deioces.

Hanan clutched at Cyaxares' arms, exclaiming,

“Look there!”

From behind a ridge, shielded by a close growth of black pine, came a body of tremendous horsemen, closely followed by a large body of footmen, both being clad in dead black.

“My father!” whispered Hanan.

Great gaps were torn in the barrier to let them through, but before they reached these openings a mass of wild horses, with wild men bestriding them and followed by yelping beasts resembling a cross between a staghound and a wild boar, arose from no one knew where, and tore like a whirlwind through, and even over, the tops of the pile, their yells being plainly heard even where they were stationed.

The Hoplites, having done their deadly execution, had transferred their cases of discs to these wild and fearless Shalemites. Holding their long spears in their left hands, with their copper shields strapped to their arms, they were running in circles while they cast the deadly discs into the ranks of the enemy. With each shower great splashes of blood, gushing from wide, gaping wounds, literally deluged Deioces' army, a sight to unman the bravest soldier. The terrifying hounds sprang among the already frightened soldiers and so demoralized them that a panic ensued. No courage could withstand it.

The Shalemites now gave way to King Nahan and his terrifying hosts. With given precision they closed in upon the already demoralized army, and began to mow down the ranks as a blade levels the grain upon the fields.

This was the last straw. Deioces' army broke and fled in terror. As a part of the fleeing hosts attempted to break through the barrier, the glittering arms of

the Dolamites confronted them, then the Gothites made a dash for them with their winged daggers.

So intently were Cyaxares and his guard watching the finish that they gave no thought to personal danger. It was seen that the barrier was now afire in an hundred places. It was to be the bier of thousands of soldiers. While gazing at the conflagration they were startled by a shout, and before they could flee two score of Deioces' mounted soldiers had charged upon them. It was so sudden that they hardly had time to place themselves on guard.

The brave guardsmen threw themselves between Cyaxares and danger, and against tremendous odds they fought until they had two-thirds of them upon the ground, but they themselves had been reduced to four battered and bleeding men. Two of the leaders had tried in vain to reach Cyaxares, who saw that their only chance was to reserve all their strength for their own defense. One of the soldiers, seemingly a leader, finally came upon the rear of Cyaxares, who had now engaged the oncoming soldiers. The young Prince Hanan had waited to the very last moment, not seeming to know just what to do.

Now seeing the approaching danger to Cyaxares, he charged his steed against that of the threatening soldier, but too late! A crashing onslaught caught Cyaxares, a glancing blow fell upon the side of his head, and unhorsed him. The shock of Hanan's charge had undoubtedly saved his life, but he was now in grave danger of being trampled to death. Throwing himself from his steed, Hanan placed himself above the prostrate form, and cut and slashed blindly at anything approaching. A fortunate stroke had felled one body unconscious across Cyaxares. A large man now

approached to finish Cyaxares. There was a diabolical grin upon his ugly face as he pushed aside two soldiers in order to reach his victim. Like a flash of lightning a keen-edged sword caught him directly across his exposed eyes, and with a scream of agony he threw up his hands and sank across the body of his intended victim.

Suddenly the remaining few soldiers fled away, hotly pursued by a body of fresh soldiers that had arrived upon the scene. Hanan was standing defiantly over Cyaxares, who lay perfectly still with two bodies lying across him. As the leader dismounted and approached, Hanan held his sword in readiness, believing in his excitement that these were fresh recruits of the enemy. His fresh young face was flushed, his eyes had the glare of a tiger at bay, and it was plain that he would fight to the death over those prostrate forms.

The leader, a tremendous man, dismounted and came calmly to the spot.

Suddenly the color fled from the young prince's face, he dropped his weapon, and extending his arms, exclaimed,

"Cambyses!" and fell into the great warrior's arms, to the latter's astonishment.

Clinging to him, he pointed to the pile, almost screaming:

"There! There! — Cyaxares!"

Instantly Cambyses pushed Hanan away, sprang forward, kicked the two men from the body, and gently raised Cyaxares' head. His face was a mass of blood. The camail had been cut entirely through, the edges pressing into the terrible wound across the side of the head and above the left ear. His closely matted hair and the glancing nature of the stroke had helped to

save his life, but anyway he was dangerously wounded.

Hanan was kneeling by Cyaxares, and with little groans insisted upon assisting Cambyses, who kept glancing at him with a puzzled expression upon his face. Straightening up, he demanded,

“Who are you?”

“I am Prince Hanan, son of Nahan,” was the quick response.

“Huh,” heavily grunted Cambyses, as he motioned his men to bring the improvised litter upon which to place Cyaxares.

Suddenly Hanan arose with a look of horror upon his face. Then, with a half-suppressed scream, he pointed, exclaiming:

“Look! Look there, Cambyses! My brother!” and he covered his face with his hands to shut out the gaze; the soldier whom he had slashed across the eyes was none other than Saranaces.

Instead, however, of Cambyses’ taking heed of the body upon the ground, he grasped Hanan in his arms, whispering, “Saluciea!”

“Yes,” was the weeping reply, for she was now overcome with the awful facts about her. In defense of the man she loved, who now lay before her as a corpse, she had slain her half-brother, Saranaces.

“Does he know?” asked Cambyses, nodding toward Cyaxares.

“No.”

“Then do not let him know your identity in this garb. We will conduct you to the caverns of Crail, where you may nurse him back to life. He is not dead, but badly hurt.”

The little procession was formed, and after tedious hours a bubbling spring was reached, and efforts were

made to bring the fallen prince back to consciousness. It was dangerous to tarry, for Deioces' straggling soldiers were all trying to return to Ironia. Nevertheless, they succeeded in dressing Cyaxares' wound, and in restoring him to a semi-consciousness that greatly alleviated the dangers of keeping him moving in his precarious condition.

It required two days to reach the secret entrance to the caverns of Crail. Twice they were assaulted by straying bands of half-famished soldiers, and at last they reached the spot in an exhausted condition. They immediately passed into the cavern, Cambyses leaving an ample guard to protect the entrance.

This was the most trying situation that Cambyses had ever encountered. He had intended joining forces with Cyaxares in the defense of the Ironian passes, in order to relieve the prince, and to allow him to go directly to Baleria and declare himself dictator till his father could come and ascend the throne. Now Cyaxares was lying more than half dead, he was two days' march from the field of action, Cracillies was momentarily expecting the arrival of Cyaxares to relieve him from the trying situation at the king's palace, and remnants of Deioces' defeated army were charging the passes for their lives. Something must be done quickly.

They were challenged at every point until they finally reached the inner caverns. Helluseus, who was in charge of the caverns, quickly passed them into the gardens and to Cracillies' private villa. He was almost overcome when told of Cyaxares' sad condition but, quickly recovering, he put all the perfect machinery of his orderly community in operation to give relief to the dangerously sick prince.

After seeing to it that absolute secrecy would be maintained regarding Cyaxares' identity, as well as regarding that of Salucica, and of their presence there, Cambyses made a dash into Baleria, gave instructions to Cracillies, then went with all speed to take charge of the defense of the passes. There he found the situation well in hand. Quite every division had had its brush with the bodies of frightened soldiers trying to escape through the passes. The ground about Regules' mountain house looked like a shambles, being strewn with dead horses and men. The defenders of the Ironian pass had taken possession, and were living off the fat of his larder, greatly to his grief.

Taking a strong body of men Cambyses forced his way through the pass, and went to the plain where the battle was fought. There he beheld a strange sight. The armor had been stripped from Deioces' dead soldiers, and now lay in heaps about the field to be returned to Ironia, while the dead bodies of both horses and men were being fully cremated. This was customary in every holy war.

Deioces' army had been so quickly destroyed that the leaders preferred to rest, and to recuperate their armies before starting upon the return march.

Cambyses asked to be conducted to Nahan, to whom he made a full report of the situation, assuring him that he could hold everything well in hand. He informed him that Cyaxares was in a precarious condition, and that it would be many weeks before he could recover, therefore he recommended that Nahan safely convey Madrilla to the Holy Crater before roving bands of Deioces' soldiers made it dangerous for a small escort to undertake this important mission. He would conduct the two princesses to his camp, then he

himself would take Almareta to the city of Aspahan.

This suggestion at once impressed Nahan, and Cambyses made another hard trip to and from the caverns of Crail to bring the young women.

To their numerous questions regarding Cyaxares, Cambyses only replied that the prince had been badly wounded, and would be an invalid for some time, at which information they both wept. Without mishap they reached Nahan's camp where they rested for a day.

Cambyses assured Nahan that the army loaned to Cyaxares should be well provided with comforts, and would eventually be returned to the crater with proper and suitable compensation. Moreover, he would keep him advised regarding Cyaxares' condition. A suitable escort had been sent for Phraortes. There had been little trouble in Baleria because of the hatred of the people for Deioces. Saranaces being now out of the way, there was no one left to stir up strife.

After having met all the leaders and having congratulated them upon the success of their arms, Cambyses went to the city of Aspahan with Almareta and made full report to Astyages. That aged king was almost overcome with pleasure at the safe return of his daughter, and at the favorable turn in the political situation that this brief war would bring. He wept upon being told of Cyaxares' plight.

All searched for a clue to Deioces' whereabouts, but no trace of him could be found. It was finally concluded that he had perished with his army.

Permanent camps were established at all the passes, and arrangements were provided for the welfare and comfort of the soldiers. They would remain there till the coming of Phraortes.

CHAPTER XV

HOME-COMING OF PHRAORTES

CRACILLIES, after carefully organizing his temporary military government over Ironia and the city of Baleria, went permanently to the caverns of Crail to care for Cyaxares. For two weeks the royal patient had lain in a half trance, not recognizing any one. Nevertheless, that flickering spark seemed to cling to the soft voice and soothing, caressing hands of the most patient and attentive of nurses. Salucia was indefatigable in her efforts to woo him back to consciousness. She wept over him, hourly prayed for his recovery, and apparently never closed her weary eyes in sleep.

Helluseus rendered every possible assistance. It was a relief to know that Cracillies was coming. She needed his sympathy as well as his aid, for she was daily growing weaker.

With loving hands she bathed the aching head, smoothed back the tumbled hair that she had saved. Not once had he been able to recognize her. At times he would open his eyes, look long and earnestly at her, as if trying to remember something, but with a groan he would again lapse into that lethargic somnolence so resembling death that she shuddered and silently wept. Her devotion was pathetic. It seemed as if her life was slowly going out with his own.

The dark, depressing night had passed. Cracillies was to come that morning. Salucia was sadly tidying up things to receive him. Cyaxares had slept quietly

for some hours. Suddenly Saluciea was conscious that he was awake and looking at her.

"Cyaxares," she softly whispered, as she took his hand in her own.

With a wan smile he looked into her sweet, weary face, and whispered in reply,

"Saluciea." Oh, joy! he had spoken her name; he knew her. Despite all she could do the great tears of joy came in a grateful shower, dropping upon his hands as she caressed them. Her love and devotion had been rewarded. How grateful she felt that this recognition had come before the arrival of Cracillies. She so wanted to feel that she had coaxed him back to life.

Cracillies softly entered the room, and stood looking at the picture.

Tired beyond further endurance, Saluciea's head had dropped upon the pillow by that of Cyaxares, and they both slept in blissful ignorance of the presence of another.

Tiptoeing to them, Cracillies assured himself that they were sleeping. He seemed to understand, and quietly left the room. From time to time for an hour he looked in upon them. Helluseus had informed him that this was the first time that he had known Saluciea to close her eyes in sleep.

Evidently Cyaxares had awakened first, for when Cracillies again peeped into the room he saw his hand resting upon Saluciea's shining tresses. He moved as he saw Cracillies, and Saluciea awoke with a quick start. Her first thought was of her patient, quickly grasping his hands as if to protect him. Placing her hands upon the good priest's shoulders, she exclaimed:

"Oh, good Cracillies, I am so glad that you have

come. I need you so badly. I know you can save him. But he is better, he can recognize me now. He spoke to me. He called my name," and she eagerly led the priest to Cyaxares' side. The latter was fully conscious now. The crisis had passed, he knew them both, although he was extremely weak and helpless. As Cracillies talked to him his eyes constantly followed Saluciea. He knew that she was his guardian angel.

Cracillies smiled as he felt of Cyaxares' hand, and found that his temperature was only slightly above normal. Patting the hand affectionately, he said,

"I can prescribe no better potion than the one that you have, Cyaxares," and he smilingly indicated Saluciea, who placed her hand upon Cracillies' shoulder, and leaned over to smooth the patient's brow.

"What is the meaning of it all?" weakly inquired Cyaxares.

"We cannot tell you now, Cyaxares. Wait till tomorrow. You have just come to yourself, and you must get a little stronger before talking about it." He patiently lay back upon his pillow, and permitted Saluciea to soothe him to sleep.

Cambyes had told Cracillies the story, how he had found Saluciea, clad in armor, and standing over Cyaxares swinging her weapon like a man, her last stroke slaying her own brother, Saranaces. She had twice saved his life. Cyaxares of course knew not of this, and was in his dazed way trying to figure out where he was that Saluciea should be watching over him.

While the patient slept, the two went fully over the ground from the time that Saluciea had been sent to the Holy Crater. Cracillies was much pleased with the trend of events, in his enthusiasm declaring that Saluciea would yet be a queen.

"I only want Cyaxares, no matter what drudgery or what honor goes with that," she softly said.

"And you shall have him, Saluciea, or else he shall never be king," and the stern old man looked as if he were capable of deciding the matter.

It was a beautiful morning; the sun was dashing its long rays down into the gardens of Crail, as if trying to pierce the very rocks and penetrate the dark caverns. Four long, weary weeks had passed. Cyaxares was now able to be removed to the palace. He and Saluciea were taking their last look about the beautiful garden in which they had been so happy, despite his illness.

The numerous birds came fluttering about the great fountain, tempted to bespatter themselves with water, while the sun was shining upon its crystal surface. They silently watched the happy, playful creatures. Looking quickly up into Saluciea's face, Cyaxares saw her eyes filled with tears. She silently covered her eyes with her hand. Cyaxares knew, but said not a word, but in a little while he whispered,

"Are the tears all gone?" and he gently clasped both her hands.

"Yes," she replied with a fluttering little laugh. "Forgive me, Cyaxares."

"Forgive you for what?" and his eyes searched her very soul.

"I—I could not help it," she said. "The time is so short, then I will perhaps see you no more."

"Saluciea, you are borrowing trouble. You are not going to leave me now. You are going to the palace with me."

"Oh, Cyaxares, you would not do that. Remember the world said that I was the mistress of Deioces. It

will say the same thing, should I be there with you."

"So it will, you shall be my mistress, and the whole world shall know it."

Her face went chalky white, and she shrank away from him.

Continuing he said, "You shall be the mistress of Ironia, Salucia, for you are to be my queen, whether I am king or not," and he held out his arms to her.

She stood for a moment as if dazed, then she resisted not, but dropped into the embrace that she knew was her final destiny. She did not have to question anything, she knew.

Drawing her close to him, Cyaxares said:

"Salucia, Cracillies has told me the truth. I know that you have by your devotion saved my life. It is now yours. Let come what will, I shall share my fate with you, no matter what the sacrifice."

Salucia said not a word, but clung to him as if fearful that he might escape.

Cyaxares was conducted to the palace because of the coming of his father, Phraortes. Great crowds had assembled about the palace gates, and about the thoroughfares through which the aged king must pass. At the palace Cracillies and Cambyses had assembled all those that were to constitute the royal household, knowing full well that in the hour that Phraortes was placed upon his throne he would abdicate it in favor of Cyaxares. When he came into Baleria to assume military charge of the city Cambyses had brought the pick and choice of his soldiers with him, and there was a splendor about the arrangements to which the people were not accustomed. They enthusiastically welcomed the new régime.

At the portals of the palace stood Cyaxares, with

Saluciea by his side, and Cracillies, Cambyses, and all the court officials. Phraortes alighted from his steed at the gates of the palace grounds, was placed in a gorgeous palanquin, and was brought to the doors of the palace, where he was greeted and welcomed by those that loved him most.

The procession passed into the throne room, where Cracillies as the highest one in authority placed upon the aged king's head the crown of Ironia. As every one had expected, the king beckoned to his son, the Prince Cyaxares, to come to him. The prince was whispering to Saluciea before obeying the summons. When a commotion was noticed about the entrance to the chamber, all eyes were turned there to see what was happening. Then Cambyses entered with a stranger, who declared himself to be a messenger from the Sapor.

Bringing him before the king, Cambyses said,

“Make known your message to King Phraortes.”

The stranger coolly looked about him, as if sure of his ground, then with a proper obeisance he addressed the new king:

“I am a messenger from the Sapor, who forbids your Majesty's abdicating the crown of Ironia in favor of Prince Cyaxares. Furthermore, it is the order of the Sapor that the Prince Cyaxares immediately report at the Holy Crater.”

The deathlike silence following this dire message was most impressive. The Sapor had made it possible for Phraortes again to assume his throne. It was the Sapor's right to dictate the political policy of the new king, but it was not the Sapor's right to assume absolute command over the person of Cyaxares, who had returned Madrilla in safety to the Holy Crater as he had promised.

Stepping forward, Cyaxares said,

"I beg of my royal father to permit me to answer this message," then turning to the messenger, he said:

"Say to the Sapor that King Phraortes will not abdicate his throne without the consent of the Holy Crater, and he holds himself subject to the Sapor's will and advice in the reorganization of Ironia, but the Prince Cyaxares is too much of an invalid to comply with the command that he go at once to the Holy Crater. He is just starting upon a journey to foreign lands to recuperate his health."

The messenger bowed and retired.

"Cambyses, come quickly, here is some new excitement for you. Go at once and have Heptes, Kapiés, and Candes follow this messenger, capture him, and hold him for five days. Send out word that he has been detained by a roving band of Deiocés' soldiers. Have your men keep the secret. After five days also circulate the story that I, journeying to foreign lands, was also captured. Then prepare an escort to go on a journey with me. Have fifty picked men."

Cambyses assured Cyaxares that his orders would be promptly obeyed.

After the ceremonies were over, Cyaxares held a conference with his father and Cracillies.

He eloquently told the story of Saluciea's devotion to him, and expressed a desire to make her his wife at once.

"Your wife! the mistress of Deiocés your wife?" exclaimed Phraortes.

They both laughed at this, assuring him of the untruth of that rumor, and telling him the romantic story of Saluciea's life.

"Nahan's daughter, a daughter of war? Well, that

is nothing to object to, if her life has been pure. Half the queens in the world to-day do not know their own fathers. I would see this Saluciea. She must be a very worthy woman for both you and Cracillies to plead for her," and they brought Saluciea to him.

The aged king looked searchingly over the lovely woman, then bidding her come to him he took her hands, saying:

"Saluciea, you are a beautiful woman. I am grateful that you have been so useful to my son. To prove that gratitude I welcome you as my daughter. Go now with Cracillies and Cyaxares to the church of the Holy State and be wedded."

Saluciea thanked him as did Cyaxares, and they went straightway to have the important ceremony performed, and Saluciea became Cyaxares' wife.

"What are you going to do now?" asked Cracillies.

"I am going straight to the Holy Crater, that Saluciea may take her place among queens."

"I do not understand you," gasped Cracillies.

"While I was there I was legally made a prince of the clans. Saluciea is a king's daughter. Nahan has said it. I will be a king of one of his provinces," replied Cyaxares.

"But that is not what the Sapor commands you to come there for," and Cracillies looked disappointed.

"I know that you think my life will be in danger by going, but I know the routine there; they are all my friends. The Sapor does not rule the city of kings. The Sapor rules the diplomatic relations of the clans with other nations. I will be admitted to the safe environs of the holy city before the Sapor is aware that I am there. I have been forbidden to seek the hand of Madrilla by the Sapor, and I have in no manner

compromised my honor with the lovely Sapor herself."

"She will be furious though, when she does learn that you are there after having sent word that you would not be. Moreover, I fear that she will not approve of your marriage with Saluciea. But more than that, Cyaxares, I regret more than you can know your going away from Ironia. I had set my heart upon your helping us in many reforms," and the good old priest looked sad and deserted.

"Cracillies," said Cyaxares, gently, "I am not going to desert you. We know the diplomatic way between Baleria and the Holy Crater. I will confide to you that the Sapor is a myth, and has been since the death of the real Sapor. These women, while they have the power of life and death over the persons of their own household, have little to do with the governing of the clans. That is the strength and the bulwark of that strange country. It is an oligarchy composed of kings. It is the most powerful and unshakable confederacy in all the world. The success of this war has given me a standing there. As the son-in-law of the great leader Nahan, I will be able to lend the powers of the Holy Crater to reorganize Ironia. I must first go to receive the blessing of Nahan."

"Your mind is far-reaching, Cyaxares. You are right. My blessings go with you. I feel as if you and Saluciea are my own children. I do not want you wholly to forget me," pleaded the priest.

"How could we, my dear Cracillies? Wait and see."

Two days later Cyaxares and his bride were on their way to the Holy Crater, while Cambyses' men were in hot pursuit of the messenger from the Sapor.

Before leaving, Cyaxares had secretly instructed Cracillies and Cambyses to make the lives of the gar-

risoned soldiers so comfortable that they would be satisfied to stay there, this being a part of his scheme of reform in Ironia.

Each day could be seen long strings of ox-drawn carts bedecked with flowers, filled with fruits and foods for the soldiers, and conducted by the women of Baleria, passing out to the several camps. At last the idle women of that idle city had been assigned a useful duty, and they liked it. Cracillies was promptly made the head of the Holy State, while Cambyses assumed the duties of advising the king, and of practically ruling the city.

Erskales, Paulius, and Zinkara were placed on board an out-going ship, and sent to a far distant land, not to return under penalty of death, as were hundreds of the bad men of Deioces' city of sin. Old Crecies died in prison. From month to month an improvement in the condition of the city was noticeable. The disposition of several thousand women of Baleria was the one great problem of the reform. Cyaxares had left special instructions to leave that problem to him. These helpless creatures must not be set afloat upon the world, to drop lower in the scale of society, and finally into a condition to cause them great suffering. They were the victims of conditions over which they had no control, and were now the wards of humanity. Thousands of them were beautiful women, capable of being utilized for good purposes. It was a problem to experiment with, and they waited patiently for word to come from Cyaxares.

CHAPTER XVI

THE SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

CYAXARES had had a special purpose in going to the Holy Crater, fraught with danger as was this mission. Nevertheless, he felt sure of his ground. Zirkan was his friend, so was Nahan. He well knew that both these strong figures would rejoice to learn that he had taken Saluciea for wife. He must now make sure of getting safely to Nahan's palace without the knowledge of Nahali. Well did he know the underlying danger. Nahali was enamored of him. He felt a great regret that he should have implanted in Madrilla's heart the promise of love, but her own mother had forbidden that. Saluciea had risked her own life, and had won his everlasting gratitude for her love. It was not a matter of choice, moreover, for he was madly in love with Saluciea. She was a woman. Her love was a kingdom in itself.

Anticipating the return of the messenger by two days, he, and Saluciea, safely disguised in the dress of priests of Crail, were demanding an immediate audience with Zirkan. That distinguished official, at the risk of his own neck, took them into his own private apartment, embraced them, congratulated them, and then personally conducted them to the palace of Nahan, in the holy city.

The ancient king had forbidden any one to molest him till he had made known that he was fully rested and recuperated from his late hardships. Nevertheless, when Zirkan sent word to him that Cyaxares and

Salucia desired audience with him, he promptly bade his slaves bring them to him forthwith.

Cyaxares informed Nahan that the Sapor had forbidden his father's abdicating in his favor, and, fearing that the royal edict might forbid his taking unto himself Salucia for wife, he had anticipated such an edict and had wedded her. Nahan laughed, and declared that the Sapor had not the power to prevent his wedding whomsoever he might choose for a wife. Nevertheless, Cyaxares was an unusually attractive man to women, and his niece, the Sapor, was entitled to sympathy, for she greatly needed a consort. She was a lonely and now almost a powerless sovereign, because of the radical changes in the conduct of the affairs of the Holy Crater since the death of the king. She had secretly hoped that she herself might wed Cyaxares, and that he might become the Sapor in fact.

"A jealous woman, with a cunning mind and a little personal power, may sometimes become a greater menace to her victim's peace and welfare than a standing army, Cyaxares. We may find it necessary to quell a riot in the Sapor's palace when she learns of all this, but we shall take every precaution to keep it from her. In recent years we have relaxed our restrictions here, feeling that as the outside world grew stronger our secretive policy would become a menace to our own integrity, hence it has been easier for strangers to get audience with this inner city. Formerly it would have been impossible for you to reach me without the knowledge of the Sapor. And now, my son, it is something for you to ponder over, when I tell you that the possibilities of your being the Sapor, and King of Kings, were very great until you wedded Salucia."

Cyaxares had listened attentively to all that Nahan

had said. His reply was without a quaver of regret or hesitation:

“My royal father-in-law, I have the best evidence in the world that it was not intended by destiny that I should be the Sapor. I have Saluciea, queen of queens, and I would not exchange her love for all the kingdoms in the world. I am supremely happy and contented with my present lot. I have come to you, not to claim protection, but to receive your blessing and approval of my course, and to solicit your support in a matter intended farther to strengthen your confederation.”

Nahan was interested. Placing his great hands upon Cyaxares' shoulders, he earnestly said:

“Cyaxares, I am proud to welcome you into my household as son. In Saluciea you do not yet know the extent of your good fortune. She is all that you say, a queen of queens. She is more, she has withstood the test of temptation without a certain knowledge of her noble birth and jealous protection. She has all these years secretly been the ward of the Holy Crater, and she has proven herself to be a noble woman. I may tell you now that the laws here require that as long as there is a Nahanite woman living the queenship of the Holy Crater is hers. The king could not take any other consort. Should anything happen to the present queen, Saluciea would become the acting Sapor, because of the fact that when the mother of Nahali died the assembly made Nahali its Sapor, and the records say that the will of the late king could not be granted because of the absence of Madrilla and the vital necessity of a Sapor in time of war. This invalidated Madrilla's claims to the throne. I say this with deep regret, for I am informed that she is a beau-

tiful and intelligent woman. Saluciea is next in line, the succession reverting back to this house instead of to the house of the king. Had there been a male heir, he would have been the Sapor. Now tell me what plans for the future you have in mind."

"It is true, your Majesty," replied Cyaxares, "that Deioces made no attempt to develop Ironia outside the small area surrounding Baleria. The vast territory of the uplands has no government. The people consist of wild bands of marauders and brigands. I desire the authority to claim this territory in the name of the Holy Crater, colonize it, and establish a government, making it one of the clans of your great and powerful confederation. But you will at once appreciate the necessity of our taking residence here in the holy city. We have in Baleria thousands of beautiful, but idle, women, who would make excellent wives and mothers under right conditions. I have pledged myself to the priests of Crail to purge Baleria of the conditions that have given that city a world-wide notoriety for wickedness. This will necessitate the expulsion of thousands of men and women. The men we shall deport by sea, but my conscience will not permit me to cast these helpless and misguided women upon the world. I propose to keep the five thousand soldiers that you have loaned to Ironia, select the best of these women, mate them to these soldiers, equip them, and colonize the uplands. I can almost guarantee that, under Cambyses' guidance as governor of this new province, in a period of ten years it will be one of the strongest factors of protection and safety for the integrity of your federation that you will have, because of its strategic position."

"Cyaxares, you are a builder of empires," ex-

claimed Nahan, enthusiastically. "With your father king of Little Ironia, Astyages king of Persis, and your new nation a clan of the Holy Crater, we will have an indestructible alliance. I heartily approve of your plans. You must go at once and put them into execution. I will send a strong escort to see you safely back to Baleria. But what about Salucia? You have arduous and dangerous work before you."

"Salucia will speak for herself, my royal father," and she, having at the last moment of this conversation slipped behind him, placed her arms about his great shaggy neck. "I will go with Cyaxares. I have defended his life once. He may need me again," and she went to his side.

"Yes, Salucia is my guide and my inspiration. I need her every minute," and he placed his arm affectionately about her.

A smile of deep satisfaction was upon the old king's face as he said:

"Yes, you need Salucia. She will make you a good queen. My blessings go with you." Then summoning his chamberlain he instructed him to provide his children with every hospitality and comfort. "I will advise you a little later, but rest well and be prepared to leave the Holy Crater to-morrow morning."

At this juncture a crier came from the palace of the Sapor, demanding peremptory audience with Nahan.

Upon being admitted, Nahan demanded to know why he was thus molested.

"The Sapor sends greetings to his Majesty, King Nahan, instructing him forthwith to send to the palace Cyaxares and Salucia, who are known to be beneath his roof without her sanction," was the ominous message.

Here was truly a grave situation. Never, in all his experience, had an occasion arisen where the senior king of the Holy Crater had found it necessary to dispute the authority of the Sapor, but well did he know that to comply with this demand meant death to both Cyaxares and Saluciea.

Instead of making a reply to this message, he arose in all his thunderous authority, and said to the messenger, "Go bring Zirkan here."

"Zirkan is detained by the Sapor," was the answer.

Ah! here was danger. At last the long anticipated clash had come. Did he deny the authority of the Sapor, she had ten thousand of the most desperate and cold-blooded soldiers in all the world to enforce her demands. They would pour into the holy city, and place it under military discipline in half an hour. No soldiers of the clans were permitted to be stationed within its walls.

On the top of Nahan's house was a huge brazen bell. Its tones could be heard for many miles. It had never been rung but once in an hundred years — on one other similar occasion. To ring that bell was to strike terror into the souls of an hundred million people. But one king of all the kings in the holy city could issue an order to strike that bell. Those who heard it would know that some vital question was at issue between the Sapor and the kings of the holy city. Within ten minutes of its ringing all the signal fires would begin to twinkle. Again the stars of heaven would, with darkness, come down to be numbered among the hosts of the Holy Crater. Delegations would start from every clan. A million soldiers would stand under arms for immediate action. The old warrior did not shirk the duty. He knew a crisis was at hand, and

he was prepared to pit his influence against a love-mad woman. He would not, at her whim, hand over two worthy lives. He would put it before the kings.

Four stalwart men were guarding the entrance to the chamber. At the clapping of his hands they entered. "Seize this messenger and hold him for my orders." This was a total surprise to the crier, who was much scared.

Nahan, calling again his chamberlain, said,
"Go at once and ring the great bell."

The official, knowing the terrifying significance of this order, hesitated with mouth open as if not fully understanding the order.

"Go!" roared Nahan, and a few minutes later there clanged forth the knell of impending fate.

Sending his household to the tower, he summoned all his servants, slaves, and household officials, and instructed them to arm themselves, and to close all the gates to the palace and only to admit the kings and princes as they arrived. Immediately the kings began to hasten to Nahan's palace. This was the beginning of a reign of terror. The gates of all the palaces began to clang; all the people hastened from the streets, seeking shelter within the walls of their own homes to await the impending calamity, and it was coming, too, even before they were within their own gates. A thousand of those black-armored soldiers came pouring into the street, and surrounded Nahan's palace. The Sapor had accepted the old king's challenge.

Nahan had no time to explain. He simply said:

"The Sapor demands the life of my daughter, Salucia, and that of Cyaxares, who is her lawful husband. I will lay down my life before I will obey this outrageous demand, and I call upon the kings of our holy

clans to help me to resent that which may befall any of their households at the whim of a lustful woman."

"For what reason has she made this demand?" asked a score of voices.

"Because she was enamored of Prince Cyaxares, and desired to wed him contrary to our laws, and make him Sapor. He wisely declined the honor, and now she seeks revenge," replied Nahan.

A murmur of disapproval went up from the kings, and Nahan knew that they would support him. They all knew that they were in a precarious position, yet there was no division of opinion. The holy city and the palace of the Sapor were built within the Holy Crater, the means of egress and ingress being by way of a limited number of narrow passes, always well guarded. The ten thousand soldiers, at the absolute command of the Sapor, could hold both against an hundred thousand soldiers from without until starvation came. But that starvation would also include the kings, and their households. This was no child's play.

Through the many balastrarias in the walls of Nahan's palace, the kings watched the soldiers deploy into the street, and take a menacing position. Cyaxares recognized at their head the captain that had twice conducted him from the gardens of the priests to the inner sanctum of the Sapor's palace. Every one wondered what the first aggressive move would be. Suddenly there was a new commotion in the street. From every opening in the palace walls hands and scarfs were waving. A murmur of a multitude of voices was heard. Even the stolid soldiers looked on in surprise and alarm. Then through the spiral-like street, in solid phalanx, came the priests of the Holy Crater, their great shocks of white hair and patri-

archal beards blowing to the breeze. In perfect marching order they came. In perfect alignment they carried tall staffs, on the top of which was a white cross with a crimson circle in the center. It was the sign of the true holy war.

Zirkan was in the lead, and directly following was the assembly of priests that ruled the Holy Crater. There was no room for doubt on the part of the astonished soldiers; here was all the authority that they knew, therefore as Zirkan waved them back they turned and retreated through the gates by which they had entered the holy city, and now the gates were barred so that they could not return.

The kings in Nahan's palace knew that that had happened which had been predicted more than an hundred years before. For the first time in the knowledge of man the priests of the Holy Crater had entered the holy city in a body. The Church now ruled the great confederation; the kings were hostages, as much so as though guarded by the armed retainers of the Sapor. The Sapor's power had passed. She was a prisoner in her own palace. The clang of that bell had been awaited for a century. The Church and the State had separated.

Zirkan alone stood at the door of Nahan's palace.

"Send to me Cyaxares and Salucica," he said. "I will see them safely on their way to Baleria."

There was no hesitation, no reason for fear. Zirkan was now the head of the priests, and could enforce any rule that he might promulgate. Nevertheless, any one knowing him would trust him. Cyaxares and his fair bride had the utmost confidence in him. They embraced Nahan, and passed out through the great silver portal, and accompanied Zirkan.

With few words and no ceremony they were conducted through the gardens, and out to the narrow plateau, where an hundred horsemen awaited their coming to give them safe escort back to Baleria. They were both sad, and yet relieved. Their personal safety was assured, yet they felt that they had left behind them a sad and dangerous political situation. It was traditional that in a day the Church would secede from the State, and would rule the clans. The long-awaited-for opportunity had come, and they had seized the government in a single hour and without a struggle. Every outlet to the holy city, and every entrance to the Holy Crater was doubly guarded by the palace guards, who were part and parcel of the cold, hard discipline of the Sapor's palace.

In due time Cyaxares arrived at Baleria, thanked and rewarded the escorting soldiers, and returned them to the Holy Crater.

Cyaxares was not happy over the strange turn of affairs. The curt dismissal from the Holy Crater carried no invitation to return. He could not go forward with his plans for a new nation without authority from the Holy Crater. It was not unreasonable for the priests rather to hold him responsible for a disagreeable change in the political and economic conditions there. It was not necessarily to their welfare that the Sapor should be deposed. As a rule these priestly communities were averse to having the even tenor of their lives interrupted. While their vows of celibacy were contrary to nature and a crime against civilization, they thought only of their own interests and many, perhaps, secretly were glad to see the cause of all their disturbances safely out of their sight. They were naturally averse to a woman ruler.

A very much more serious and irritating thing awaited Cyaxares in Baleria. Cracillies did not greet him with the same fervor as of old. In silent anger and humiliation he summoned Cambyses, and they talked long and seriously of the delicate situation, then together they went to Phraortes. That good old man tried to convince them that there was nothing personal in the case, that it was only the morbid reaction of war, and that it would soon right itself. Nevertheless, both Cyaxares and Cambyses were determined to keep themselves in activity. Cambyses informed Cyaxares that he intended going on a private mission of his own, and he hoped that he and his fair bride would remain in seclusion at Phraortes' palace until he returned. Taking only his three faithful guardsmen with him, he started on his way on some mysterious mission. Cyaxares and Salucia looked wise, but said nothing. Perhaps they were right, perhaps wrong; it was Cambyses' affair.

Upon becoming settled in his father's palace, Cyaxares' mind relaxed, and he began to realize the joy of having a companion whom he could trust more than he had ever trusted any one before. Salucia was a comfort indeed, making him forget his troubles, and inspiring in him the old desire to reorganize Baleria. Phraortes, having all confidence in his son, gave him a free hand. He welcomed Salucia as his daughter, as his friend Nahan had saluted Cyaxares as his son.

In disguise the lovers again went over the old ground, but they avoided the house wherein they had first met; they both desired to blot from their memory the events that had occurred there. Moreover, they did not visit the caverns of Crail, nor did Cracillies seem to care to meet them. This puzzled them more

than any other thing. Nevertheless, they went cheerfully about laying their plans for the rehabilitation of the city. The first move was for Cyaxares to place himself in command of the army garrisoned at the several passes. Making his headquarters at Regules' mountain house, he soon had order restored to the army, and discipline took the place of languid idleness.

He brought into his close confidence all the officers, and they looked upon him as their head and leader. On one bright morning he and his staff of officers rode into Baleria to inspect that city. For three days they went carefully over its districts. Two days more they spent out in the country districts, and then they returned into the city. The officers returned to their several charges, and Cyaxares remained in Baleria. Mysterious doings began from that day in Little Ironia. For two months great activity prevailed in both city and agrarian districts. Cyaxares had made daily excursions about the city, sometimes taking Salucia with him in disguise. All the ships at his command were put in sailing order on the Persian gulf, and many visiting ships had been chartered.

At last an eventful day came — his plans had culminated. The garrisons moved as a body to a temporary position near the city. A sufficient number was placed throughout the city and a drag-net started. Thousands of undesirable men of the city of Baleria were escorted to the sea, placed in the triremes there waiting to receive them, and deported to foreign lands. At first the city was in a turmoil, the people were much frightened and excited, but in a few days it was all over, and order was restored.

One week later a day of festivity took possession of

Little Ironia. The army was divided into five divisions. Long strings of two-wheeled carts streamed into Baleria, laden with fruits, vegetables, and farming implements. As they passed into the city they were taken in hand by officers. A woman with a small pack was placed upon each cart, and given a staff for guiding the single ox that drew the vehicle. Then they were passed on until five long lines were formed. It was a wonderful sight. Garlanded with flowers, and with the women singing, and playing the tambourine or stringed instruments, five thousand of these carts wended their way out of Baleria, ostensibly to pay a visit to the several camps of the army.

Imagine the dismay of these willing merrymakers, however, to reach the camps and have a grim soldier placed upon the seat by each woman, while the carts kept moving. Thus each soldier received from Baleria his wife and outfit, and in perfect order drove through the passes, finally reaching the uplands where rich land awaited them.

From this planting grew the great nation afterward known as the Achaemenians, one of the most powerful of the Persian monarchies. The Sesanians, another great nation, also sprang from this colonization scheme that cleansed Baleria. Cyaxares' judgment was correct, these women only needed womanly occupation to redeem them. They and their soldier husbands begot one of the most hardy and beautiful races in all Asia.

Seven thousand men and women were deported from Baleria. The country people had begun to realize that a new régime had begun. Officials had searched out their conditions until a systematic regeneration of Little Ironia could be accomplished, and this was noble

work for Cyaxares and his wife. Soon Salucia was known as the queen of Ironia and Cyaxares as the future king. Both were welcomed and beloved by the people.

Not one word of protest had come from the Holy Crater; the routine business between the Church and the State in Baleria went on without shock or jar. Cyaxares had done things, great things. He had in his composition the metal of a king. Its genuine ring was heard across the world.

A year had passed, and Cambyses had only been heard from once in Aspahan.

Cracillies had held aloof. Not once had Cyaxares seen him after his first meeting upon his return from the Holy Crater, but now the occasion had come when his official presence was urgently required at the palace. An heir was born to Cyaxares. Cracillies came, and christened it in the name of the Holy Trinity, Nahan. This event again united the Church and the State in Ironia, and the colony was reorganized as provincial to the tight little nation. Cracillies, without explanation, assured Cyaxares of his friendship and good-will.

CHAPTER XVII

DEIOCES STANDS IN THE MARKET-PLACE!

“**L**OOK! Deioces stands in the market-place!” was the terrifying cry that electrified Baleria. And a wave of terror swept over the city. The cry reached even to the palace.

It had been a full year since Cambyses went on his mysterious journey; no word had been received by Cyaxares of his doings or even of his whereabouts. Finally, however, he had drifted into the city of Aspahan. Seeking his old comrade, he confided to him his ambition to ascertain the whereabouts of Deioces; he had business with him. The grim old warrior smiled, saying:

“Yes, Crecies is dead, I am told. Deioces will need a new butcher. But I fear, Cambyses, that you would practice too much on the anatomy of old Deioces himself.”

“No, I am not looking for that particular job. I am curator at large for King Nahan’s new museum at the holy city. Confidentially, I seek to fill a certain niche there, awaiting the head of a certain late king of Ironia,” was Cambyses’ ominous reply.

“No one, so far as I can learn, knows the present abode of your victim, therefore tarry with me for a while. Sooner or later we shall find a clue. Have those cheerful murderers that you lug about with you lay off their duties long enough to feel the relaxation of freemen, for you are a tyrant of the hardest type,

Cambyses. I will undertake to amuse you, and make you forget to kill a man for a week."

"Not for longer time than a week," boastfully retorted Cambyses, and off they went to plunge through the exciting streets.

In a little pleasure resort they saw through the lattice three ugly individuals, drinking and in animated discussion. Cautiously approaching, they listened. They were the three henchmen of Cambyses, discussing the merits of some dancer that they had seen.

Kapies had had his tongue cut out by a band of brigands who had once captured him. Heptes had had his ears sliced off in Bagdad in a fight over a woman. Candes was the only whole man of the three, consequently he had the better of the other two in affairs of the heart.

"Ha! She spurned Paulius; what show would you have, Heptes? You will have to have a pair of sow's ears nailed onto that rattle-box of yours before she could talk to you. As for you, Kapies, you might stand some show. A woman loves best the man that can not talk back to her." And thus Candes taunted his comrades upon their unfortunate infirmities.

"We will admit, ye blessed of the gods, that fortune hath seen fit to preserve your external parts, ugly and gnarled as they are, but your lack of wit more than offsets that advantage," hotly replied Heptes.

Poor Kapies could only turn purple with suppressed rage and gesticulate his approval of Heptes' words, for they never fought each other.

"Ha! Ha!" tauntingly continued Candes. "Your retort is sharp, but it hath no sting, coming from duller wit than I boast. I am wiser than I am witty, for I know whether a wench loveth me or not before I

make an ass of myself in the presence of other people."

"You will have all the wags in Aspahan punning about your wisdom ere a week has passed," grumbled Heptes.

"A week!" exclaimed Candes. "Why, you will have all of us slain in two nights, if you do not cease your attentions to Scala. You are not in her class. Why, the king's son, I am told, is not now good enough for her. I warn you: Leave her be."

At the mention of Scala's name, Cambyses pressed the arm of his comrade, and whispered, "That is enough: I will stop it."

Entering the room, to the consternation of the three trustees, Cambyses roared, addressing himself to Candes:

"Cease your prattling, Candes, ere I cut your tongue out, as did the brigands for Kapiés, doubtless for the same fault. If you listen more to him, Kapiés, I shall send your ears to adorn the walls of King Nahan's museum of anatomy, to keep Candes' tongue company; and your own tongue must follow the others, Heptes."

"Then, good master, how could we deliver your messages?" plaintively said Heptes.

"That is true. I shall spare your tongue and amputate an arm instead."

"Then how could I fight for you?" asked Heptes.

"Well, make it a leg," retorted Cambyses.

"How then shall I go to battle with you?" was the faithful henchman's final plea.

"Cut off his head, good master," spoke Candes. "He has less use for that than any other part."

They all laughed heartily together, and drank to one another's good health and pleasure; then Cambyses

said that he would forgive them, and he gave them their freedom until further orders.

This was a merry crew of well-seasoned and fearless old sinners, without respect for the laws of God or of man. Aspahan long remembered the roistering time that they had while it lasted, which was but for three days and nights, because of the tragedy that we shall now relate.

Cambyses and his comrade went systematically about ascertaining something of Deioces' present hiding-place, and, on the third day, were rewarded by positive information regarding his rendezvous.

Not desiring to arouse suspicion or curiosity by his presence in Aspahan, Cambyses had refrained from making himself too conspicuous in the public places. But now that he had secured the information he sought, he decided to have one night of recreation, and to leave the next morning by daybreak.

Sending for his henchmen, he instructed them to look carefully over their horses and their entire equipment, and to stay with them and be prepared for an early start the following morning.

That night he and his friend went the pace, putting the street and the resorts in an uproar. In each resort Cambyses scattered a handful of silver upon the stage for the dancers to scramble over. They drank copiously.

It was midnight. There was one celebrated place which they had not visited. Befuddled as he was, Cambyses dreaded the ordeal. He knew that Scala was there: Scala knew that he was in Aspahan. Scala had gone the pace that kills. She had clung to the young Prince Claudies until very recently, when she had become quite promiscuous in her friendships. She dared

not ask why Cambyses had not sought her. She herself dreaded the meeting. Her quarrel with Claudies was a serious matter, as every one knew. He was desperately, madly, in love with her, and resented the attentions of other men. In the hearts of Scala, Claudies, and Cambyses there was a feeling of impending crisis that night.

Cambyses and his comrade took seats near the low platform, upon which the dancers performed. Scala was a tremendous favorite. The platform was smothered in flowers in her honor.

A great shout went up. Four pages, clothed in white silk and wearing wreaths of rosebuds upon their brows, their long blond curls dancing merrily with the graceful swing of their bodies, bore through the quickly improvised aisle a beautifully wrought *palyanka*, in which was seated the queen of dancers — Scala.

Cambyses caught his breath. She was beautiful beyond anything that he had ever seen before. Before he could wholly recover she had tripped lightly onto the platform. The cymbals ceased their droning, as the danseuse posed, and with an air of triumph she looked about for a single instant, while she raised her pearl-bedecked tambourine, and poised herself for flight. Cambyses was stunned. She was absolutely nude but for a single gauze of woven silver — a mere sheen of spider-web weave. Her magnificent person was the acme of artistic perfection. About her brow she wore a broad golden bandeau, in the center of which shone a resplendent jewel. From her shoulders, and fastened to her wristlets and golden anklets, were streamers of finely woven rosebuds. There was nothing false, nothing modest, about her. She knew that

she was the highest embodiment of the artistic nude; there was nothing to feel ashamed of. With cheeks ablaze and with sparkling eyes, she bounded into the air, and her wondrous grace transfixed Cambyses. As she whirled those graceful limbs of polished ivory and performed her many amorous contortions, he was lost in wonderment and admiration at her skill, forgetting that he was watching that Scala whom he had once declared that he would rather know was in hell than dancing nude in the streets of Baleria.

She had not seen him in the audience. He suddenly felt that some one on the opposite side of the platform was rudely staring at him. Coming out of his trance he looked at the individual, and a thrill passed through him. It was Claudies. He and two companions were openly and impudently discussing him. As a scowl of resentment passed over his face, they laughed derisively.

Suddenly the gyrating beauty ran to the edge of the platform, with a little cry of surprise, and looked down upon Cambyses, holding out her hands toward him.

"Come, good Cambyses, come greet me. Please!" And she still held her hands toward him. As this occurred Claudies was seen to arise in his seat, and lean forward as if awaiting the effects of Scala's invitation to Cambyses. Cambyses arose, stepped to the edge of the platform, and took Scala's hands in his own, and kissed them in the midst of the applause of the audience. There were tears in the eyes of both as they looked at each other.

Before any one could surmise what was happening, Claudies, with a scream of jealous rage, sprang upon the platform, ran to Scala, and plunged a long glitter-

ing dagger into her back. She fell forward, and into Cambyses' arms. For a moment the house was shocked into silence. Claudies stood glaring down upon his victim as if gathering strength for another spring.

Gently passing Scala to his companion, Cambyses sprang upon the platform with drawn sword.

"I am not violating my oath to your father, you rat," he said between his clinched teeth, and he repeatedly plunged his weapon into the body of the degenerate young prince, who fell among the flowers.

The place was now in an uproar.

"Come," said his friend, "we must get out of this." For a moment he resisted, then taking a long look at the beautiful form lying upon the platform in the midst of her roses, he pressed his great hand upon his heart, and they quickly made their way out, and to Cambyses' headquarters. An hour later he and his guardsmen had passed out through the king's gate, bound for the great salt desert.

For long weary hours they rode without a word. Cambyses was heartbroken. Not until that fatal moment, when he saw the gleaming blade pass into the beautiful smooth skin and to the heart of Scala, did he know what love was. It had, in a dumb sort of way, teased and tormented him, but never before had it stabbed him to the very marrow.

To him now the satin-skinned danseuse was as pure as the driven snow. If he could suddenly look up and find her riding by his side, he would never return. He would ride on to some isolated oasis and live there in peace and joy with Scala, who had loved him, and had thought that he had spurned her affection. He blamed himself greatly for the tragedy of her life.

Thus they had ridden all day long. Their tired

steeds could hardly draw one foot after the other. At nearly nightfall they found a water-hole and prepared to camp for the night.

The alcohol with which their systems were saturated by the three days of hard drinking, needed fuel other than their tissues, therefore they were hungry. The dry lumps of bread that they carried were poor compensation for what their appetites craved. Candes took his bow, and went into the shrubbery. It was a wild, desolate place with no signs of civilization, and bore little evidence of animal life. Nevertheless, the hunter soon returned with a young wild pig, which he had bagged. This seemed to arouse Cambyses, who began to direct them in the proper roasting of the game. Together they sat by the solemn glow of the flickering fire, and devoured the pig. It was a feast, indeed, for the tired men. After taking the usual precautions for safety,—one keeping sentry while the others slept,—they sought the sleep that no man knows who has not been pushed to the limit of physical endurance.

They had found the source of the water near at hand. This obviated their having to partake of the water in the pool, fouled by the wallow of the wild hog. Day after day they traveled. The guards began to look askance at one another and to nod their heads. They were growing weary of it, and they wondered where Cambyses might be leading them. They were covered with a white alkaline substance that teased the eyes and nostrils. Their salt-encrusted lips cracked, and the silence of desolation was ringing constantly in their ears. Food for their tired animals was growing scarcer each day, and they were reduced to a few hard crusts of bread. Occasionally, about the

saline water-holes, they would knock over a lean little sand snipe, the fortunate hunter eating him raw rather than waste a drop of his life-giving juice.

Cambyses knew that he was pushing his men too hard. Not a murmur had been heard, yet he felt the impending revolt, therefore he was more than content when they came upon a fresh trail, showing the tracks of many horses. He was about to be vindicated. They were poorly prepared, however, to meet the surprise that quickly followed. Before they could realize it, they were surrounded by fifty horsemen, headed by no less a personage than Deioces himself. Realizing that they were trapped, and knowing that no quarter would be shown, Cambyses made a dash at Deioces. The king was no match for the powerful old warrior. His blade swept Deioces' head off his shoulders like knocking an apple from a tree. The intrepid guardsmen threw themselves between the horsemen and Cambyses, while the latter with a single motion snatched the head of his victim in his hand, and trailing with him the well-worn purple robe of the king dashed away. Amazed at this foolhardy piece of bravery, the horsemen could hardly believe their eyes when they saw Cambyses fleeing like the wind, a safe distance from them, while his three brave henchmen were mowing the enemy down like blades of grass.

As much as Cambyses disliked to flee from his brave followers, it was wholly useless for him to sacrifice his own life needlessly, when he had more urgent use for it. The chances were very good that they would escape, as they had done before in the face of tremendous odds.

On he sped until his steed stumbled from sheer exhaustion. How he ever reached the civilized country alive he could not explain. He only knew that, tired

and exhausted, he lay by the road when a caravan passed on its way to Aspahan. They gave him food and drink, and directed him to the nearest way to the Ironian pass.

Just before reaching Regules' mountain house, two mounted soldiers, whom he recognized as Deioces' prowlers by the square crosses on the tops of their helmets, accosted him.

"Why such haste, comrade?" asked one of the men, as he confronted Cambyses.

"I am late for dinner," responded Cambyses good-naturedly.

"What have you there?" was the next query, and the soldier poked his sword at the bundle fastened to Cambyses' saddle.

"A fat pig that I am taking to a fair lady, whose heart I desire to win," replied Cambyses, laughingly.

"Ha! Ha! A fat pig and a fair lady, both too slick to hold," laughed the soldier. "One might think, from its contour and its royal wrapping, that it were a head."

"I wish it were the head of my worst enemy," said Cambyses.

"And whose head might that be?"

"The head of the devil," roared the old soldier, and he plunged past them before they could prevent it.

Taking a short rest at Regules' place, he recounted to the aged retainer the fate of Scala, not forgetting to add that he had made a sieve of the young prince's body. Regules took it hard, notwithstanding he had had his trials with his wayward daughter. He and Cambyses both wept.

To his utter joy and amazement, as he was about to set out for Baleria, three tired horsemen, battered and

bandaged, came galloping up to the mountain house. It was his intrepid guardsmen, too tired and starved to talk. They could only gasp for a stimulant. They were quickly plied with refreshments, and permitted to rest before they were pressed for their story. It was simple. They cut their way out, and were never headed. None of their wounds were serious. Their condition necessitated a day's rest for recuperation before starting for Baleria.

It was near morning when four tremendous horsemen responded to the peremptory challenge of the guards at the environ of Baleria. Fortunately the soldiers recognized Cambyses, and they were permitted to pass on into the city. Straight to the market-place they went. In its midst stood a post, six feet tall, with a spike protruding from its top. Unrolling the robe, Cambyses lifted out the head, straightened out the beard, and thrust the spike up through the neck. Then he placed a piece of wood into the shoulders of the robe, and draped it over the post. Lowering the camails of their mailed bonnets, they stood at arms, two on either side of Deioces.

Day was already breaking, and the market people could be heard singing as their little two-wheeled carts wended their way toward the soldiers.

An old man came into the space, bearing upon his head a large flat basket, filled with fruits. Seeing the strange figures standing like wooden things in the center of the market, he came closer and scrutinized them with suspicion. Suddenly, with a loud scream of terror, he dashed his basket to the pavement and ran, crying at the top of his voice:

“Deioces is standing in the market-place! Deioces is standing in the market-place!” Others took up the

dreadful cry until all Baleria was ringing with it. Fear seized the people, and many began to pack up their belongings and flee the city, not knowing the meaning of the fearful news. Others came running to the market-place to see what was causing the excitement. In an extraordinarily short time a great throng had gathered. The crowd was augmented as others took courage and trended there. All Baleria was coming to look and shuddered. It was a silent mob, awed by the aspect of death in the gruesome scene. The people were afraid to draw near unto the strange group. They had definitely recognized that they were gazing upon the dead features of Deioces. The skin was drawn back over the skull showing the teeth; there were no eyes; the distorted face seemed to have taken on a satirical grimace of death, and its tousled appearance made it grotesque as well as awesome and gruesome. It needed but a spark of witticism to start the crowd to jeering. But who were these other silent forms? Were they also of the dead? They at least did not move, yet they looked dangerous and menacing. Their tremendous size, their hard-used, rusty, and dusty armor, and their grim, determined attitude inspired respectful fear.

For an hour the mob increased, but stood in silence, as if expecting something to happen, for evidently this death group was waiting for some one to come. The market people did not attempt to seek their stalls or positions.

The clank of approaching soldiers was heard. The cry that Deioces was standing in the market-place had reached the palace. A runner was sent to see what it meant. He returned with horror in his face, and told what he had seen. Well did Cyaxares know who the

rusty warriors were. Cambyses, the terrible, had returned.

A small body of soldiers, with Cyaxares at their head, turned into the square, and at once surrounded the group. The old guards sheathed their weapons, and raised their camails. Truly their faces looked almost as harsh as did that of the sightless Deioces. Tanned to a grayish brown, and filled with the hard lines of terrible exposure and hardships, their countenances resembled a contingent part of their battered armor. The bandage having slipped down about his neck, a long ugly wound was exposed across Heptes' face, adding no beauty to it. One side of the curtain to Candes' bonnet had been slashed loose, and trailed down upon his shoulder. The whole top of Kapies' bonnet was gone, and his bristling hair stood up like a rusty old plume. The rundle on Cambyses' shoulder was battered into an unrecognizable mass, and was hanging by a piece of cord, with which he had attempted to lash it into place. Truly, despite the gruesome reality of the scene, it was most comical, and Cyaxares laughed outright at their forlorn and battered appearance, as he embraced his faithful old comrade. The people taking advantage of this turn, laughed and jeered also.

"You must have had a fight, Cambyses," remarked Cyaxares, glancing at their much abused armor.

"No, we were blown over the mountains by a sirocco from the great salt desert," replied Cambyses, "but we got what we went after," and he looked affectionately at his gruesome trophy. "A rare specimen for King Nahan's museum of fine arts."

Cyaxares shuddered as he looked into the horrible face. "Let it be announced," he said, "that the peo-

ple may all take a final view of the features of their despoiler, that they may never forget the ugliness of tyranny when stripped of its power and tinsel." Then he gave orders to his soldiers to remain and guard the relic, while Cambyses and his men were being made more comfortable. The tired henchmen were provided with suitable quarters, and Cambyses became the guest of Cyaxares at the palace.

After being made presentable and given a good long rest, he told his interesting story. Salucia wept greatly at the fate of poor misguided Scala.

A few days later, Kapies and Heptes were sent on a journey to the Holy Crater, carrying with them the head of Deioces, and a message of compliment as a gift to Nahan.

CHAPTER XVIII

CYAXARES AND CAMBYSES DINE AT THE "THREE FISHERMEN"

CYAXARES and Cambyses consulted long and earnestly over the attitude of Cracillies, which was most puzzling. He had assumed his duties as head of the Holy State in a most perfunctory and half-hearted way, showing no especial interest in any of the suggested reforms for Baleria. It was out of the question for Cyaxares to demand an explanation. But with Cambyses it was quite different. He was a mutual friend, and he could go to Cracillies as a disinterested friend, only desirous of bringing together again these two who had formerly been on terms so excellent, and he did seek Cracillies.

His reception was anything but cordial. Cambyses was not, however, a man to be put off. He bluntly told Cracillies that he was acting like a pouting child, disappointed over some trivial matter. He was making himself and his best friends most uncomfortable, if not unhappy. Some explanation was due to Cyaxares, who could not help feeling that his old friend was holding against him some imaginary grudge. "I desire to know in what manner he has unwittingly given offense," he said.

The old priest listened sullenly, but finally said: "You may say to Cyaxares that he has not purposely offended me, but that this recent political change has brought with it the cause of my sorrow. It is mine alone, and no man has the right to demand of me an

explanation; my feelings are my own. I do not care to inflict upon others my troubles. That is the reason for my seeming aloofness. The underlying reasons I will not discuss, even with you, Cambyses."

Cambyses reported to Cyaxares his unsatisfactory interview with Cracillies, and they were more puzzled than ever.

Desiring to know public opinion regarding the many radical changes that had occurred in the government of Baleria, Cyaxares and Cambyses, accompanied by Candes, disguised themselves, and made a night of it in the different divisions of the city. While the people were now privileged to go with freedom to any portion of the city, they availed themselves of this license with reluctance, doubtless due to habit and to a feeling that the old prejudices of caste might bring them into dispute with their neighbors.

While Heppotes and Feres had been ignobly deported, their resort had been left practically as it was for this very purpose. It was an excellent place for good old wine and well-prepared sea foods, hence a rendezvous for the ever hungry priests.

This pleasant night three priests of the Holy State went leisurely behind the latticed front of the "Three Fishermen," took a secluded table, and ordered wine, fish, and rice. There were several groups of priests already well warmed up, and talking loudly.

Four hearty fellows, with ruddy cheeks and pompous persons, were quite near the table occupied by Cyaxares' party. They were priests of the Holy Crail, who were now granted greater liberty than formerly.

"The liberties we now have are telling on you, my good Pompilies. It requires more rope to girth your already inflated personality," said one.

“You are too polite, Molienes; call it my belly. May it never cease expanding while this good wine and fish may be had with which to fill it,” responded the big, healthy gourmand.

“Speaking of liberty, in what particular respect does this differ from the old *régime*? We came here then; we come here now. We eat the same; we pay the same. For my part I am not sure that the new order of things will not drift finally back to the old moorings. The new king is morally better than Deioces, but he is very old, and may topple over at any time; the young prince, Cyaxares, is an unknown quantity. Who can tell what the near future holds for Baleria, with her commerce by sea gradually slipping from her because of the new policy of the government?”

“Why, Cratus, that is quite a lecture,” exclaimed Pompilios. “You might continue and say that Cracillios is also getting very aged, and takes little interest in these economic and political changes, therefore we youngsters may run wild.” Each one was more than sixty.

“It is not Cracillios’ age that makes him seem indifferent toward his exalted promotion. He would rather be a plodding farmer and have a well heart,” remarked the last of the four priests.

“What’s this? What’s this? Solus, have you, too, some great secret gnawing at your vitals?”

“Did I not help to bring Saluciea’s body to the caverns? I thought he would die of grief upon looking at her apparently dead face that night, and when at last we brought life back into her body, he nearly went mad with joy. I shall never forget that scene. He himself never knew to what extent he betrayed himself. No man could speak and act as he did without

having some deep underlying sentiment tearing at his heart."

Cyaxares could hardly contain himself, but Cambyses whispered that it was too important a matter not to try to know more.

"You don't mean to say that Cracillies was rival to Erskales?" said Pompilies.

"Oh, no, there was no intimation on Salucia's part of a knowledge of Cracillies' infatuation for her. In fact, the first word that she uttered upon her return to consciousness was the name of Cyaxares. At this Cracillies seemed provoked. Perhaps you are not aware that the prince lay in Cracillies' private house almost wounded to death, and that Salucia nursed him back to life there. Perhaps that was not gall and wormwood to an old man madly in love."

"Why, you astonish us. I, at least, was not aware of that. It speaks well for Cracillies' noble nature that he thus permitted his rival to rivet the fetters upon his own heart which impelled him to wed Salucia afterward."

"There was more than gratitude in the marriage. They are madly in love with each other, and it is quite certain that Cyaxares solved the mystery about her life, and found that she was a pure woman, as Cracillies declared that she was, for the prince is not a man to fall prey to an adventuress."

"It is to be hoped that she will make him a good wife, for I believe that he will be our king, and I have confidence in him. He seems both honest and capable," said Molienes.

"I consider his planting the colony in the uplands the most astute political move in recent times. It establishes a blood tie between Ironia and the Holy

Crater. Deioces made himself world famous by advocating the holy trinity, or triple alliance, but this is even a closer and stronger tie, a blood alliance," earnestly suggested Pompilios.

"It seems a pity that Cracillies has dropped so deep in the slough of despond. It is becoming noticeable to all, and may be construed as disapproval on his part of the many reforms of the new king. I hope something may occur to alleviate the situation," said Solus.

"Have you heard that a conclave is soon to be called to rehabilitate the triple alliance?" asked Cratus.

"Why, no!" exclaimed the others in surprise.

"Yes," continued Cratus. "The powers at the Holy Crater are anxious to select a permanent head for the priests of Crail. Cracillies has declined to name one. It is secretly believed that he prefers the seclusion of the caverns to the arduous duties of the head of the Holy State. He will doubtless ask this favor in the next convention."

And thus they rattled on, until Cyaxares had heard enough. Not deeming it wise to resent this free and easy discussion of himself, and to betray himself as a spy, they slipped out and wended their way toward the palace.

"We have learned three very serious things, Cambyses," remarked Cyaxares. "I believe what Solus says regarding Cracillies' being secretly infatuated with Salucia. He told us an indirect falsehood the night of that terrible tragedy when we thought her dead. Moreover, he had some very serious motive in returning her to her father without my knowledge."

Cambyses nodded approval.

"The other two important matters are, Cracillies

is not pleased with his promotion, and a conclave is soon to be called to choose a head for the priests of Crail. Should Cracillies beg to be returned to that position, I am at a loss to know who could become head of the Holy State, and keep the Church and the State united. I am fearful, Cambyses, that the Church is desirous of drawing wholly away from the State, in which event the triple alliance is at an end, and the kingships of Ironia and Persis are but precarious responsibilities."

"I am not pleased with the outlook, Cyaxares," responded Cambyses. "When the rank and file of the priests of Crail feel no restraint about openly discussing such important matters in a public place, where the ears of any one may hear the gossip, discipline is out of joint. Such a license becomes a liberty sure enough. Such men become dangerous. The priests of the Holy Crater have absolute control over the standing army. What is to prevent the same conditions here?"

"Nothing," doggedly replied Cyaxares.

A fortnight later Cyaxares was startled to receive a peremptory order to meet a visiting delegation from the Holy Crater at Regules' mountain house. He and Cambyses, with a suitable escort, immediately went there.

Their surprise was increased to find awaiting them Zirkan, a delegation from Aspahan, and an escort of one hundred well accoutered soldiers.

Zirkan demanded to be conducted to Baleria. Upon arriving in the city, he went directly to the edifice of the Holy State, where he held a long secret conference with Cracillies, afterward being a guest at King Phraortes' palace. That night he, King Phraortes,

Cyaxares, and Cambyses sat till the small hours, discussing most important matters.

On the following day a conclave was called at the palace of the Holy State, Zirkan representing the Holy Crater, Cimetus representing Persis, and Cyaxares and Cracillies representing Ironia, and, for the first time in history, the Achaemenians had representation in the peace conference of nations, Cambyses being designated to represent the new nation.

The first act of the convention was to recognize Phraortes as king of Ironia; the next, to establish a form of government for the Achaemenians; the next, to the utter astonishment of that individual, was to declare Cambyses king over the new nation. The office of the Holy State was abolished, and Cracillies was made the official head of the Holy Church and high priest over the priests of Crail. A covenant was entered into, assuring peace and harmony between the Holy Church and the ruling powers.

Cyaxares was chagrined and puzzled. He knew not what to say to Salucia. Not one thing to elevate or honor him had been suggested, notwithstanding he was responsible for all these vast changes and promotions.

He desired to give to Salucia the title of queen, and expected to be named king of the Achaemenians. Cambyses was as much insulted at the apparent slight as was Cyaxares himself. But no one dared to criticise what had been done. Zirkan informed Cyaxares that he and Salucia would be required to return with him to the Holy Crater, the start to be made the following morning.

That night, as Cyaxares and Salucia were preparing themselves for their journey, word came that Cra-

cillies desired to speak with the prince. He instructed that he be brought into their private apartment, and that no one, not even a servant, be permitted to enter while the prelate was there. Cyaxares had cautioned Salucia regarding the conduct of Cracillies, and they both expected a scene of some kind, but would be more than generous with their old friend.

Cyaxares received him alone, and was most cordial to him, saying: "We would have been most unhappy, good Cracillies, had we gone away without having had the opportunity of bidding you good-bye. We are more than pleased that you have made it possible, for we have thought from your attitude toward us that you had taken offense at some unwitting act of ours. Let me call Salucia."

"Your speech is generous, Cyaxares; but do not call Salucia until I have had speech with you," he replied. "Do you recall the conversation that we had in the gardens of Crail upon destiny and fate? Well, I am the victim of fate, Cyaxares. I know that you will not take offense at what I am about to tell you, but, had you not lived, I would have been the Sapor, King of Kings."

"Cracillies! What do you mean?" exclaimed Cyaxares.

"Simply this," said the prelate. "Wotan, predecessor to Zirkan, was my closest living friend. I was in constant communication with him. Through his influence I met Nahali before she was wedded to the Sapor. Her marriage was contrary to her own desires, for she was secretly betrothed to me. After the death of the Sapor, I spent ten years in an effort so to weld together the Church and the State of the Holy Crater that the Sapor could remain the head of both.

I had so far succeeded that it only awaited the death of the acting Sapor to unite Nahali and myself. Wotan, the lord of war, was favorable to this, as was the council of twelve. We had an understanding that you should take Madrilla as wife and become king of Ironia. I was fearful that the fascinating Saluciea would win you away from Madrilla, therefore I had her secretly conveyed to her father's home in the holy city. But the train of tragedies that followed your visit to the Holy Crater, so far as my interests were concerned, were, the sudden death of Wotan, the sudden death of the acting Sapor, Madrilla's mother becoming enamored of you, thereby losing her to me, and your becoming enamored of Saluciea, which took you away from Madrilla and caused a rupture between Nahan and the Sapor.

"These things all occurred in such rapid succession that it was useless for me to attempt to put my plans forward, therefore I had no alternative but to remain with the Church, which has seceded from the State, as you doubtless know by the abolishment of the office of the head of the Holy State in Ironia. In future, the Sapor will be king of the Holy Crater in name, but the Holy Church will have a distinct head, who will be the real ruling power.

"To be sure, I know, Cyaxares, that you have not been the willing agent of all these strange happenings, yet they have developed out of your purpose to set yourself upon the throne of Ironia. Naturally, therefore, I feel despondent and disappointed at the outcome of our elaborate planning.

"You are going upon an uncertain mission. I no longer have the close confidence of the powers of the Holy Crater, because Zirkan knows of the former pur-

pose of the council of twelve to promote my cause, and, the conditions having so radically changed, my ambitions are dashed and my career is at an end, therefore I desire to give you a clear understanding of the matter before you go. I do not hold you responsible for my misfortunes and failure." The old prelate paused with a deep sigh. Seizing the opportunity, Cyaxares said:

"This is all a great surprise to me, Cracillies. Yet it would seem that we should console each other, for, as you well know, I, too, have drawn a blank, so far as my political aspirations are concerned, but I can ask you to congratulate me, in that I am more than compensated by having won Saluciea for my wife.

"You have relieved me of a matter that has given me much concern and cause for grief by confiding to me your sentiment for Nahali, for I must confess to you that I have heard rumors that you entertained an affection for Saluciea. This seemed to be corroborated by certain matters that have been made plain to me since my return from the Holy Crater. Your explanation, however, puts a new phase upon your actions."

Cracillies arose and paced across the room in deep thought. Suddenly turning upon Cyaxares he said, almost fiercely:

"Bring Saluciea. What I say I want both to hear."

Cyaxares felt some alarm regarding the new attitude of the priest, yet he called Saluciea into the room. She would have greeted Cracillies most cordially, had he not resented it with uplifted hand.

"Touch me not," he said authoritatively. "Saluciea, you were untrue to your vows to me, made when I brought you back to life. You promised me faithfully that you would never again look upon the face of Cyaxares. You stole him away from Madrilla.

Your very life belonged to me. You pledged it, yet not one moment have you spared in your efforts to ensnare Cyaxares into marrying you."

"Cease, Cracillies! Accuse not Saluciea, else I may forget our friendship," exclaimed Cyaxares, placing himself in front of the prelate. "Saluciea is now my wife. She has made me supremely happy, and I am most grateful to the fates for having given her to me."

With a gesture of impatience Cracillies said: "Wait till I have finished. You had no claim upon Saluciea when you left her dead, as you thought. You were pledged to Madrilla. I violated no confidence with you when I restored her, and accepted her promise not to seek you again. I have tried to keep faith with Madrilla's mother. I must inform you that I have not been the legal head of the Holy State, and now that that office is abolished, your marriage has no sanction of law. I informed you before, and I warn you now, that the Holy Church will not sanction your being legally united with Saluciea."

"Stop, Cracillies!" commanded Cyaxares. "I do not know what your motives are. I care less. But your methods do not seem honorable. I must forget our friendship, and resent your insinuations. You forget that the statutes say that, in the absence of a presiding head of the Holy State, the king has the full legal responsibility of that position, and shall exercise the functions of that high office with the same legal effect as though performed by that official himself. I respected Saluciea as well as loved her, therefore I took no chances, but had my father, King Phraortes, perform the offices of the head of the Holy State, which you now confess you falsely represented at that time. Therefore, if you have in mind anything

that depends upon the nullification of our marriage, you may dismiss it from your mind at once. For the safety of Ironia I deem it expedient to place you under restraint until I know what your motives and purposes are," and he was about to summon an official.

"Don't do that, Cyaxares," said the old prelate, with humiliation most touching. "I am wrong. I am willing to admit that I am wrong. We all make mistakes. I have made mine. Prepare to go on your journey. In the meantime I will prepare a letter, in which I will make a confession to you. But you must promise not to open and read that message until you are safe within the protecting house of Nahan, then you and Saluciea read it together. God bless you, I bear you no ill-will." With this he passed out of the room in a most dejected state.

Both Cyaxares and Saluciea felt deeply pained as the result of this interview. They were convinced, as much as it pained them, that Cracillies entertained a guilty passion that he had not the courage to confess. It was no reflection upon Saluciea, therefore the prince only placed his arm about her, saying,

"Saluciea, my queen, he has my sympathy, for I know how truly fascinating you are." Then they dismissed it from their minds.

CHAPTER XIX

CYAXARES BECOMES SAPOR

IN the early morn a splendid procession passed out of Baleria. Zirkan, the high priest and lord of war of the Holy Crater, Cyaxares, and Salucia were well in advance of the soldierly escort. The representatives of Astyages left the escort at a point turning toward Aspahan, and the others went on their way to the Holy Crater. The journey was pleasant, and seemed shorter than usual. Upon reaching the environs of the Holy Crater there was little parley, Zirkan hurrying them through, and to the palace of Nahan.

An air of mystery pervaded the city of kings. Few people were in sight. Nahan himself seemed sad. He was, however, much elated upon their arrival. But they were quickly passed to their part of his great palace, and bidden to remain in seclusion until summoned.

All this mystery disturbed them not a little, until Cyaxares was bidden to attend an important conclave that same night. Upon being conducted to the great audience chamber in Nahan's palace he was cordially welcomed by the kings that he had formerly met. They treated him as an equal, showing no surprise that he was present.

Little did he think or know that this was the most important convention that had been called to assemble there in a century. Zirkan, accompanied by the twelve

other high priests of the Holy Crater, came into the room, and the meeting was called to order, Nahan presiding. He abruptly opened the proceedings by saying:

“Kings and Prelates of the Holy Crater:

“You are well aware of the importance of this meeting, therefore I will bluntly say that upon our finding here to-night depends the integrity of our confederation.

“By a curious state of affairs, the Holy Church has felt called upon to assume the functions of government. The Holy Church, being the educational system of our confederation, it was legal and right that it should assume the reins of government in the absence of the authentic ruling power, which both State and Church have hitherto acknowledged, for there must be a legal head to every system.

“But now the time has come to choose a head of both State and Church as has hitherto been a source of satisfaction for both branches of our great nation. It is proper for me to say that the priests of the Holy Crater have tacitly intimated that they, having assumed the powers of government, are legally entitled to retain the same and place upon the throne one of their own choosing. This is contrary to our constitution, and would quickly disrupt our strong confederation. But to deny the Church a voice in choosing a head of our nation would deprive it of a specific function conferred by our constitution, therefore Zirkan and the council of twelve are gathered here with us to perform this most important duty. Zirkan has assured me that the Church holds the most friendly sentiment for the kings, and will abide by our decision and choice. It is now in order to present candidates

for the highest office in all the world, for he who is chosen here to-night will be Sapor and King of Kings. It is the beginning of a new dynasty, and of a new line of kings, and it speaks well for our honor and stability that we thus assemble in friendly conclave to select one to rule over us instead of wrangling for so high a position.

“We must recognize the necessity for maintaining the present stability of our long-standing, peaceful, and prosperous confederation, therefore our hearty support and confidence must be pledged in advance to him whom we honor as our leader.

“In courtesy to the Holy Church we first request Zirkan to name a candidate that would be acceptable to it.”

Applause and expressions of approval followed this brief address, and all eyes now turned to Zirkan, who arose and said:

“Because of our vows of celibacy the law does not permit a priest to become a king, unless he be absolved from his vows by the high church council, giving him the right to marry. Modesty should forbid my saying it, but it has been suggested to me that I myself might become a candidate for this high honor. I am frank to say, however, that I do not approve of this. The King of Kings, in my opinion, cannot legally come from the priesthood. It would be the usurpation of an office that does not, by precedent nor by privilege, rightfully belong to the Church, which is but the educational branch of the government. The recent act of the Holy Church was not to seize the reins of government and take away from the kings this power, but it was to preserve the integrity of a form of government that has withstood the test of ages, although feudal in its

nature. The fangs of feudalism have been drawn, and an enduring union of friendship has long bound together the kings of the Holy Crater, and I speak for the Church when I say that we shall give our support to him that you select to be your King of Kings, only reserving the privileges and prerogatives that the Church has hitherto enjoyed. We accept the courtesy of naming a candidate."

All the kings murmured at this, and a wave of surprised approval moved them to congratulate Zirkan. It had been thought that the Church would insist upon some radical change in the constitution granting it greater powers, at least. They did not know that Nahan and Zirkan had searched out the intricacies of the situation in the minutest detail, and had found that but one legal course was open upon Nahali's being deposed. The next in line of succession was Saluciea, and her husband, having been legally made a prince of the Holy Clans, was now Sapor by right of succession. Nevertheless, this was held in reserve; it was preferable that the kings have a direct voice in the selection of a Sapor. The legal aspect of the case would be used in case of an emergency.

Zirkan was an educated man and a philosopher. He admitted, without argument, that the Church in its true function was an instrument, not a principal, in the conduct of the government. It had to be supported by a people. It had no power to support a people. It could guide but not coerce, being a moral factor in the conduct of the nation. The moment it seized, and began to exercise, the function of a controlling government it surrendered its moral character, and became an usurper of the powers of legal and physical force, and this sooner or later would be recog-

nized and resented by the people, the great confederacy would rise and repudiate the Holy Church, a thing that had to be guarded against constantly, for, in the final analysis, the Church was a thing of toleration and courtesy. Its very existence depended upon its good behavior and its usefulness to the people. To betray greed for power, avarice for wealth, and an undue authority over the people was to draw down upon it the suspicion of being a degenerate and predatory dependency, attached as a leech to the body politic.

After a brief parley, Zirkan again addressed the assembly, saying:

“Necessity is of more vital importance in choosing your king than is the conferring of the honor of this great and responsible position upon some favored person; utility should supersede sentiment in passing judgment upon so important a matter, therefore, in suggesting a candidate, I make my selection by a long and careful analysis of the facts and of the necessities of the confederacy.

“I take into consideration the fitness of the man, physically, morally, and mentally; then I weigh his experience, his successes, his honorable record, and his birth and breeding. I examine the legal aspect of the case, and I find that my candidate was born a prince while his father was yet upon the throne. I find that he has been educated in the schools of the world, and he has been trained in diplomacy. He has been a tried and loyal friend of our confederacy, as his royal father has always been. He has a wide acquaintance and close friendship with all the ruling powers of the triple alliance. He has been tried in the strategies of warfare, in the conduct of government, and in the building of empires. He has been a success in his every under-

taking. He is young, strong, and kingly in appearance. He is beloved by all that know him.

“The legal phase of the candidacy is unquestionable. He is a prince of the clans in good standing, is the husband of the natural succession, the son-in-law of our senior king, and knows absolutely nothing of my intention to present his name. I name as my candidate a man — Cyaxares.”

It was apparent before Zirkan had ceased speaking that he was going to name Cyaxares, and all eyes were upon that surprised and embarrassed young prince. That his surprise was genuine every one knew, and a friendly smile of satisfaction had passed over the audience. While, perhaps, there were many princes there that had secretly dreamed of being Sapor, it was apparent that on a vote Cyaxares would win, therefore one of the kings waved Cyaxares down, as he attempted to speak, and quickly offered a resolution to accept Cyaxares as the unanimous choice of the assembly, and before the move could be checked the young prince was made Sapor and King of Kings.

King Nahan embraced Cyaxares, and all the kings congratulated him. Then he stood in their midst, and spoke to them:

“To the kings, princes, and prelates of the Holy Crater, I am most grateful. I am overpowered by the responsibility of the great honor that you have conferred upon me, almost a stranger in your midst. To this grand king, whom I have the honor of addressing as father, I owe much. To my good friend Zirkan I owe much, and now, collectively, you place me under eternal obligations to all the kings and priests, therefore I am bound by all the ties of honor, manhood, and gratitude to dedicate my life to the welfare, support,

and upbuilding of your great institutions. In accepting the high honor I pledge my life and all that goes with it that I shall be faithful and loyal to the causes of you and of your clans.

“Now, in conclusion, let me speak of another honor that has been placed upon me, and, without meaning to deprecate your favors, because it too is of your giving, I confess that I prize it above the kingship,—I speak of my marriage to Salucia, my queen.”

Instantly all were standing, and amidst great applause and congratulation Nahan entered with Salucia.

It was a happy, though embarrassing, moment for her. She was suddenly made the greatest queen in all the world. She was pathetically devoted to Cyaxares, therefore her greatest delight was in his elevation. As they crowded about to congratulate her, she looked up and found Zirkan smiling upon her. Instantly she extended her hands to him, and whispered, “To you I owe it all.”

“Repay the debt by making Cyaxares a good queen,” he responded.

The essential part of the conclave was ended. The kings passed out through the silver gates to go to their own palaces and tell their impatient families of what had occurred. There was general rejoicing that Cyaxares had been chosen King of Kings. All had confidence in him.

In the seclusion of their chamber Cyaxares took Salucia into his arms, and held her there for some time, yet he remained silent.

“You seem downcast, my beloved Cyaxares.”

“I am, Salucia. I am not elated that I am King of Kings.”

“Why not?”

“Because, my queen, I realize now, when confronted by the vast responsibilities of my high position, that in you I had a kingdom without cares, and free from the complications that must beset the king of a great nation. I was supremely happy, for every moment of my time I could think of you, and dream of our happiness. Now I must think sometimes of other things, many other things.”

Placing her arms about him, Saluciea said affectionately: “My king, because I am a woman you give me no credit for being useful to you. Do you remember Prince Hanan?”

“Yes,—why, of course,—and I am ashamed to say that I have woefully neglected to inquire about my late comrade in arms. We swore eternal friendship. In fact, I wear his ring,—we exchanged rings in token of our vows. You must plead forgiveness for me, Saluciea.”

“You have more than kept your vow, Cyaxares,” and she opened a small casket, took therefrom Cyaxares’ ring, and slipped it upon her own finger. Then she held it up in front of his face, saying, “See, Hanan also wears your ring.”

“Saluciea! What are you saying!” he exclaimed in amazement.

“I am Hanan,” she laughingly replied.

For a moment he held her at arms’ length, then drawing her to him pressed her head against his bosom, caressing and petting her the while. He knew that she wanted to weep. He had never told her what he supposed was the truth, that her brother Hanan had slain Saranaces in his defense. Now the truth had stunned him. A woman had stood over him slaying men, even

her own brother, in defense of his life. She had nursed him back to life, and that woman could keep this secret from him all this time. How much he owed to her love! As he pressed the beautiful head to his heart a great lump came up into his throat, he again saw the cold white face in the house in Baleria. He shuddered and raised her head to make quite sure that she was there and living.

“And I might have lost you, Saluciea, my sweet queen. Now I am happy. Again we shall buckle on the armor together. I know the metal of my guardsman. I will have no fear. We shall rule the Holy Crater with love.” Then they sat in long and earnest conversation regarding their future.

“But what about Nahali and Madrilla?” asked Saluciea.

“I cannot get the truth about it, Saluciea. I have asked both our royal father and Zirkan, but they make no explanation.”

“Oh, Cyaxares,” suddenly exclaimed Saluciea, “we have forgotten to read Cracillies’ message.”

“So we have,” he replied, and drew the letter from his blouse.

Breaking the seal, he read aloud:

“To Cyaxares and Saluciea greetings:

“Love levels all mankind. Men are honorable in quite all things but in politics, in war, and in love. Jealousy has been the cause of more wars and bloodshed than all other causes. It is of love that I make my confession.

“I informed you, Cyaxares, of my own political ambitions, which were dashed upon your entering the same field. It is true that I was seeking the highest pinnacle of fame, and my goal was in sight, when your presence changed the entire situation. But this matters not. It is

trivial. My confession to you is a thing closer to the heart. It concerns Saluciea. Like Saranaces, I had my price. I fell when my opportunity came. I had from her childhood adored Saluciea. Secretly I sought every opportunity to see her, feast my hungry eyes upon her beauty, and my hungry heart upon a wild imagination that sometimes I might possess her.

“Saranaces’ opportunity came when he found that he had secretly entrapped Erskales. Mine came when I secretly had Saluciea conveyed from the house in Baleria to the caverns of Crail. There I intended to keep her, my prisoner of love, and, but for a curious thing, I would have done so. A peremptory order came to Deioces to send Saluciea to the Holy Crater. One of my men had talked too much, and the rumor went abroad that Saluciea was in the caverns of Crail as a ward of the Holy Church. The messenger came and demanded her of me. I dared not refuse, and this was my only reason for sending her away. I had a wild dream of becoming the Sapor, with Saluciea as my eventual consort. It was my desire to win her to an ambition to rise to that high estate.

“My reverses upset my senses. I was wildly jealous of you. I was filled with a desire for revenge against both of you. In all my life I never before experienced the sensation of jealousy. I was even-tempered, free from morbid thoughts, and thoughtful for the feelings of others. All my commendable traits fled me in a day. While you lay sick in the caverns, and Saluciea faithfully attended you, I relented. I surrendered her to you, although with great reluctance. I afterward regretted this, my old feeling of resentment returned, and my life was embittered to the point where I decided to destroy myself out of my own misery. I made myself a nuisance to everybody, and where I had enjoyed your confidence and friendship, I made you suspicious of me, and justly so.

“Oh, Cyaxares, forgive me, I am more than repentant. Pity me in a misery for which there is no cure. Your

queen is as chaste as the driven snow. She knows nothing of my insane infatuation.

“Oh, Salucia! an angel among women! If I could but once embrace you before going, it would compensate me for all my sufferings. The anguish in my heart smothers me. I loved you as a mother loves her babe. Surely somewhere in eternity I shall see your beautiful face graven in God’s works, that I may fall down before it, worship it, and plead for forgiveness.

“Now I bid you both an affectionate farewell, for long before this meets your eyes I will have departed for that great unknown. Pray for me, and try to forgive me. May all the peace and joy of earth be your portion during your days.

“CRACILLIES.”

Silently they sat after the reading of this sad message. Salucia quietly wept, and Cyaxares’ heart was too full to speak.

Slowly he folded the parchment, replaced it in his blouse, and sat holding Salucia close to him. Surely every new joy has its compensating sadness. All the kingdoms in the world could not at that moment have pushed away the veil of sorrow that fate had thrown about them. It seemed to them an ill omen following quickly upon the heels of their high promotion.

“Come, Salucia, I forgive Cracillies. He could no more help loving you than I could. Let us forget. We have a future to think of, and that future shall always be bright for you.”

On the third day thereafter delegations began to arrive in the holy city from all the clans, bearing magnificent presents for the new Sapor and his queenly consort. The inauguration was the greatest event of its kind that history records. Untold millions in gold,

silver, and precious stones were lavished upon Cyaxares and Salucia. A great new palace was erected, in which light and sunshine could live. Life in the palace of the Sapor was a joy of which all the people of the holy city partook.

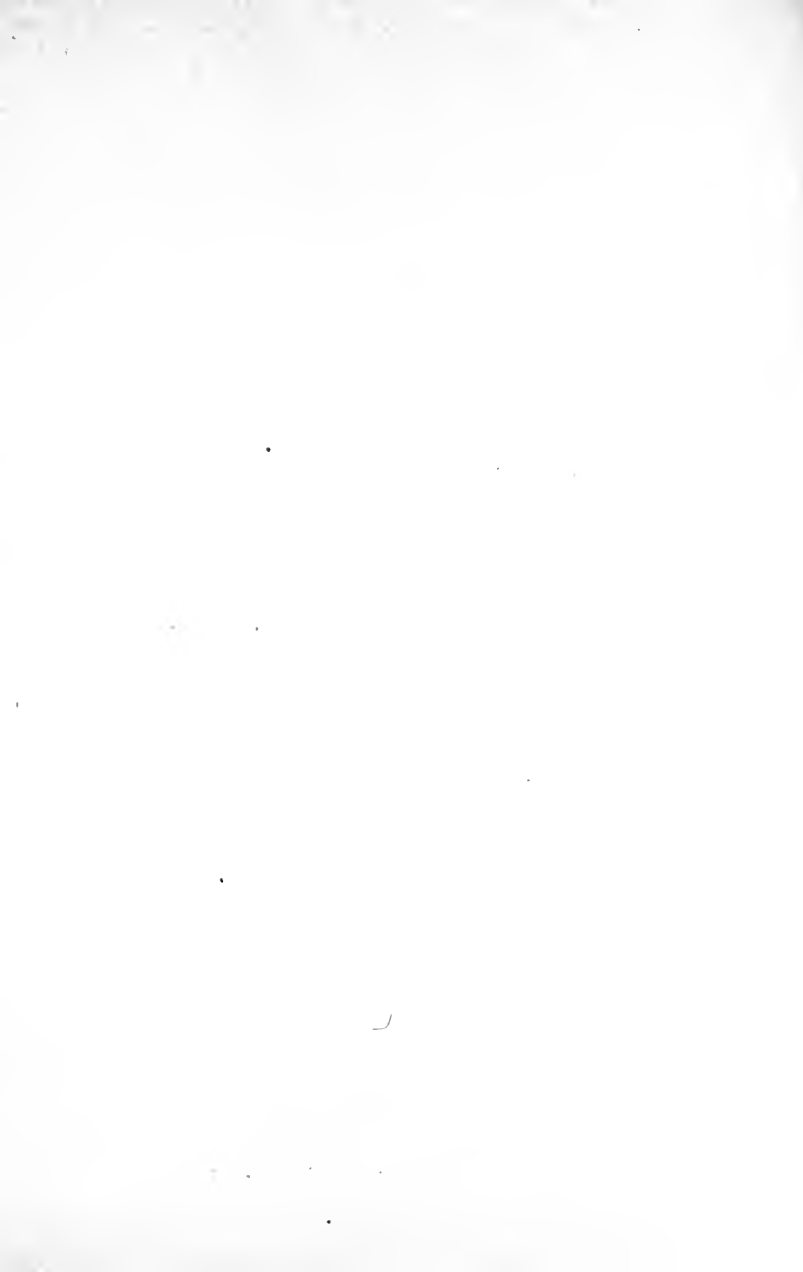
The priests of the Holy Crater came at will to the palace to pay homage to the grandest king and queen that they had ever known. Science, art, and learning in every branch took on a new impetus. The priests now made long and frequent educational pilgrimages to the very hearthstones of the people, and the clans were taking on new enlightenment in the dawn of the new era.

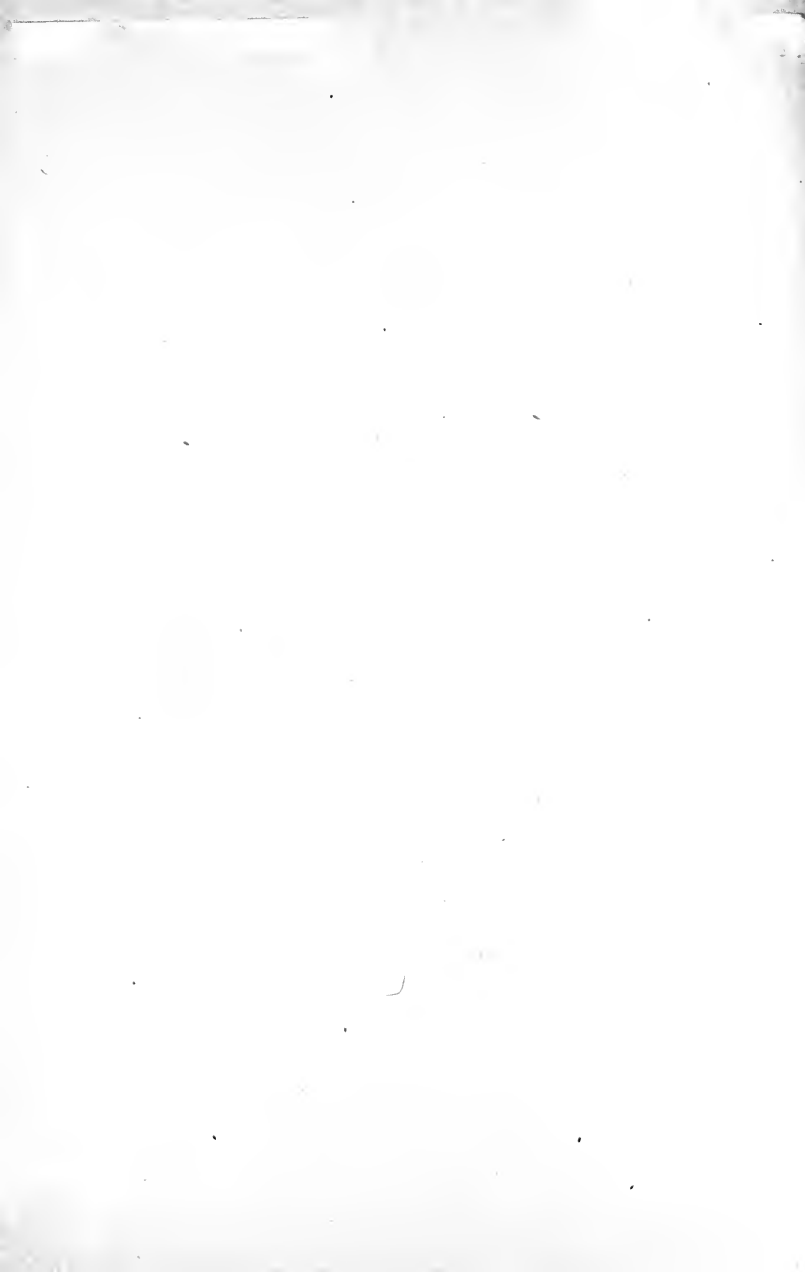
In vain had Cyaxares and Salucia sought some information regarding Nahali and Madrilla.

Finally Cyaxares demanded of Zirkan,

“Where are they?”

“They rest in the sepulchre of the Sapor,” was all the reply that he would make.





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